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OR, The Queen of the Hidden Hands.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN COLDGRIP" NOVELS,
"JACK JAVERT," "HERCULES GOLDSPUR,"
"COOL CONRAD," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. THE TIGER KING.

IT was just before the lighting of the lamps of New York that a man well clad, quick of step, with his face partially concealed, dodged into the office of one of the lines of ocean steamers.

A young man writing behind a barrier of glass looked up and smiled.

"Another anxious soul," thought the bookkeeper. "If I'm not mistaken, he's the two-hundred and tenth caller for to-day," and then he leaned slightly over the counter and finished with the stereotyped, "What can I do for you to-day?"

The visitor, who had tilted his hat back so that the face hidden on the street was visible in the soft light of the office, stepped up to the bookkeeper's window.

AT LENGTH THE PUZZLE STOOD REVEALED TO DANTON AND THE MAN OF TIGERS.

Any news yet of the City of Moscow?" he asked.

"None," answered the clerk.

"What do you think?"

"My opinion is the opinion of the house. She'll come in all right."

"When?"

The visitor was a trifle nervous.

"Ah! that we cannot say, of course. The Moscow may have met with a trifling accident. She'll come in to-morrow, perhaps."

"Without fail, eh?"

"We all think so. The office is not at all uneasy. I've had the pleasure of saying this to several hundred anxious people to-day. Good-night, sir."

"Thank you. Good-night."

As the stranger walked toward the street door, he threw his hand up to his hat-brim and pulled it down over his forehead. Then he dodged into the street and disappeared with the same agility with which he had appeared upon the scene.

"Did you know him, Butler?" inquired a middle-aged man, who occupied an office chair a few feet from the bookkeeper's stool.

"Yes."

"Well, let me hear your guess."

"It is no guess. That man was Nadir Bali, the famous tiger-tamer. Of course he isn't wearing his ring costume to-night, but, though he can change his garb, he keeps the same eyes."

"You are correct, Butler. Your last visitor was the somewhat celebrated Bali. He gets his cat step from his tigers, I presume."

"And his eyes also, I suppose. I wonder if he is looking for any more jungle pets by the City of Moscow?"

The man in the chair took a large ledger-looking book from a rack before him and opened it at a certain page.

"There are no wild beasts on board the ship," said he looking up at the bookkeeper. "Something else makes the tiger-tamer anxious. I haven't seen the fellow since he performed in Madison Square Garden, last fall. Indeed I did not know he was in the city. Has he retired?"

"Oh, no. He is lying off for awhile, nothing more. He has a house on M— street near the Park."

"Does he keep his tigers there?"

"I believe he does."

"Nepaul, Nero and Nina?"

"Yes, sir; everybody who has seen them recollects their names."

"Nina is the tigress?"

"Just so, sir, and the fiercest member of the trio."

The occupant of the chair arose and put on a light overcoat. While the night was not cold, a penetrating breeze was coming up the bay, and a bit of buttoned cloth over one's chest would not come amiss.

"You had better stay a little later than usual, Butler," he remarked to the bookkeeper. "Leave the outer door unlocked and answer all inquirers about as you answered the tiger-tamer. We shall have the Moscow in by to-morrow night. That'll make the underwriters feel good, and will put renewed confidence in our line. Good-night, Butler."

The clerk responded with the conventional good-night and went back to his work. For ten minutes he did not have a single caller.

By and by he felt conscious that he was not alone. The presence of some one whom he could not see asserted itself in a manner that rendered him uneasy.

"Please, mister," said a child's voice, "are you the gentleman what tells about the ships?"

The bookkeeper laughed at his fears as he bent over the counter and looked down through his window upon a boy who stood on tip-toe while his dirty little hand pushed a piece of paper forward.

"I can't tell much about ships when they're out," answered the clerk, taking the paper which was folded. "What is it you want to know?"

"The writin' I'll tell."

But the writing did not tell at first glance for it was in pencil and the words were blurred here and there, but the bookkeeper leaned toward the light and read:

"Please tell the bearer anything you may know of the City of Moscow now two days overdue. Have you any fears for her safety? Tell the boy briefly. He will not forget. AN ANXIOUS INQUIRER."

Butler looked from the note to the face beneath the window.

"Who sent you here?" he queried.

"A lady."

"I don't doubt that."

"A lady who lives in a fine house. She did not think to give me her name. Didn't she sign it on the paper?"

The clerk of the steamer office did not see fit to answer the question. He gave the boy the same information which had been tendered to Nadir Bali, the tiger-tamer, and the urchin was off like a rocket.

He went back from the wharves into a better part of the city. He flitted along like a diminutive specter, but he had some one on his track.

The truth is that the tiger king had encountered the boy on his way to the ship-owner's office. His restless black eyes had detected the ends of the note of inquiry in the hand that clutched it tightly, and for him to see it and to guess the boy's errand was to turn back and follow him to the very door.

While the boy and the clerk were having their interview, the tiger-tamer stood on the outside among the shadows of the buildings with his eyes fastened upon the scene beyond the glass in the office door. He could not hear the bookkeeper's words but he seemed to guess their import and when the boy came out he resumed his espionage.

He had, as the ship-owner said, the catlike tread of the animals he tamed and exhibited. At times on the trail he dropped into the slouching gait of the tiger and such were his movements that he sometimes approached so near the boy as to have caught him with his dark velvet hands.

"What! ain't he never going to stop?" exclaimed the tiger-tamer to himself when the boy had led him more than a mile from the down-town office of Corker & Cuttle, ship-owners. "Everything indicates that he came from her to whom he is now returning. I know what makes her so anxious about the City of Moscow. There's more at stake than Corker & Cuttle imagine. I saw Corker himself behind the counter, and he looked at me as if he wanted to say, 'How are your tigers, Captain Nadir?' but he's one of those men who would wash their mouths after a talk with a tamer of wild beasts. I know him. Shrewd, cool, merciless and always after the almighty dollar. May be he wonders what makes me so anxious about the missing ship. His cabled manifest will tell him that I have no tigers coming, though the Moscow carries one to America. Yes, Conway Corker, I know why more than one person wants the vessel to come in, all right. There's a million in her safe return in the pockets of certain people. If she has gone down a little game now being played is likely to fail. Ah! there goes the boy! He's near home now."

The tiger-tamer followed his little prey into a street where the houses were for the most part handsome private residences. He saw the boy run nimbly up the steps of one of these and ring a bell.

Nadir Bali drew near enough with his hat brim pulled over his eyes to catch a glimpse of a tall woman in evening costume as the door was opened wide enough to let the boy glide inside.

"Tell her everything, boy," smiled the watchful man outside. "Butler, the clerk, didn't give you any bad news, and you'll see her eyes snap while you spin it out for her benefit. I won't disturb her to-night, but I'll appear on the scene later."

The tiger-tamer watched the house a few minutes, or until the door opened to let the boy out.

The little fellow ran away with one of his hands tightly clinched, and a gleam of joy in his eyes. He had received excellent pay for his services and seemed anxious to show it to some person who would rejoice with him.

Nadir Bali did not follow any longer. With his dark orbs riveted upon the house he walked past close to the closed shutters as if he wanted to look beyond them and see what was going on where the light was.

"Why not make sure of it by putting a ferret on the trail to-night?" he asked himself. "I know the best one in Gotham—young, agile, fearless and eager. I need not appear in the game yet. I can keep in the background and give the Shadow Sharp his clew. Why not, I say? Ought I to wait until the Moscow comes—till they meet and play their hand for a million and human life? They will suspect me. I will be marked by the Hidden Hands, but I am not defenseless. A man with three tigers for a body-guard ought to hold his own."

The wild-beast-tamer turned from one street into another a long distance from the house to which he had tracked the boy.

All at once he dodged into a small restaurant with a number of private stalls along one side. Taking one of the stalls, he ordered a bottle of wine and between glasses wrote the following in a disguised hand:

"DAN DANTON, Detective:—

"The leaven of murder and theft is working. The City of Moscow is bringing in the leading spirit of the most damnable plot ever hatched on these shores. An old man's life and a young girl's happiness are at stake. The Hidden Hands are arranging the trumps to suit themselves. Don't miss the Moscow when she lands. Pick out the tall passenger with heavy eyebrows and a small crescent-shaped scar under the left lower eyelid. That is the man for you to watch. The band will turn upon you with the ferocity and stealth of a lot of tigers. Believing that you know something about the Hidden Hands, I will only add: 'Show your mettle now.'

"A SECRET ALLY."

Nadir the tiger king read his work over and smiled with satisfaction as he emptied a glass of wine to its success.

Then he went out and hurried away.

Five squares from the restaurant he disappeared in an open hallway and ran up a flight of

steps. On the second floor he found a locked door to which was tacked a piece of tin whose inscription he read by the light of the janitor's jet as follows:

"DANIEL DANTON,
Detective."

The tiger-tamer drew his letter from his bosom and dropped it into the letter slit in the door.

"I'll go back to my pets now," said he, turning away. "I've pitted tiger against tiger to-night. My head for a football if I haven't!"

CHAPTER II.

LYNX ROBS LYNX.

NADIR BALI, as he was called on the flaming posters that blazoned his name and deeds wherever he performed with his tigers, was supposed to be a native Bengalese. He had the darkish skin, the expressive eyes and the little and supple figure of that people, but, in point of fact, reader, he was no more a native of Bengal than you are.

The tiger-tamer of New York never told any one that he had dyed his skin to its present hue for the purpose of investing his name and feats with some of the mystery and awe that surround the inhabitants of the East. He was nothing less than an adventurer whose parentage was unknown. As he could speak Bengalese as well as several other languages, it was supposed that he had traveled a great deal. This was true. Nadir Bali, whose strange history will come out in the course of this story, had traveled, and if he was an impostor in some things, he knew the jungles of India as well as did his tigers, Nepaul, Nero and Nina.

When he had dropped the warning written in the stall of the restaurant into the letter slot of the detective's door, he went to a large house which stood on a quiet street. Entering with a night-key, he passed to a front parlor where he turned on the gas.

The room was luxuriously furnished. There were rich rugs on the floor, and the furniture was in keeping with the other useful decorations. Nadir threw himself into a chair, and took a cigar from a box on a center stand. Crossing his legs, he began to smoke. The tiger-tamer was satisfied with what he had done.

By-and-by the door in front of him was pushed open, and a beautiful head striped with yellow and black made its appearance. Two fierce-looking eyes were set in his head, and for several seconds they studied Nadir with singular curiosity.

"Come in, Nina," spoke the tiger-tamer, and the immense body of a magnificent tigress slouched into the room!

Crossing the floor with velvet tread, she placed her front paws on Nadir's knees, and rising upon them, leant forward and licked her master's cheek. For some time the tiger-tamer fondled the dangerous pet, then he bade her tell her mates that he had returned.

The tigress slunk from the room, and Nadir had his cigar to himself for a few moments; but, all at once, the heads of three tigers appeared on the threshold, and, as the man snapped his fingers, they sprung forward, and with friendly growls threw themselves upon him. The hands of the tiger-tamer knocked them right and left; he threw them over each other, and wound up by leading them into a pitched battle on the carpet, where they writhed for several minutes in what appeared a fight to the death.

Suddenly the tigers disentangled themselves and faced Nadir, side by side, waiting for another command. He could have led them through a round of performances, but did not, and when he dismissed them, all three turned reluctantly away and sent disappointed looks toward him as they ascended the stairs in the hall.

"My fortunes!" exclaimed the performer, as the last tail vanished. "Men envy me the possession of those magnificent beasts. They flock to see me handle them in the arena, and they pour money into my coffers. They don't know my power. No; they never dream that I can launch my tigers at an enemy by crooking my finger. I am Nadir Bali, the Bengalese Tiger King. The big posters say so, and they dare not lie. I am more than Nadir, as the League of the Hidden Hands shall see, and as the man who comes with the City of Moscow shall discover. What will the detective say when he reads my warning? Will he watch for the tall man with the scar under his eyelid? He will. I know Dan Danton, the Shadow Sharp! You won't land in New York unseen, Samson Sparks!"

The last thought seemed to give Nadir a great deal of pleasure. He appeared to hate to the dregs the man who was one of the passengers of the vessel overdue, which, at that very hour, though he knew it not, was signaled at Sandy Hook, and would be up to her dock in the morning.

If Nadir had lingered about the door through which he had dropped the warning, he would have seen the man whom he called Dan Danton. While he played with his striped pets, the city detective came back to his quarters and found the paper on the floor.

Dan Danton had fairly won the nickname of the Shadow Sharp. He was an independent Vidocq—that is, he belonged to no organization, and had no chief to issue commands which had to be obeyed. He preferred to be under no restraint, to acknowledge no authority but his own, and the laurels he won could not be taken from him by any superior power.

The detective was a good-looking personage of thirty-six. He had a smooth face, a clear blue eye and hands which, although soft as velvet, had a grip of iron. He had his office where those who wanted his services could easily find him, and the door that swung noiselessly on its hinges had opened to admit strange clients and the walls had heard singular secrets.

The Shadow Sharp glanced at the writing of the warning the second time before he tried to master its contents. Nadir had written it in pencil.

"Hol! another arrow pointing toward the League!" exclaimed Danton. "The writer is right. I do know something about the Hidden Hands, but not enough. It is the most invisible league I have ever dealt with. What does my unknown ally say? 'An old man's life and a young girl's happiness are at stake.' This means that both will be sacrificed if the Hidden Hands play their trumps. The scarred individual who is coming over on the City of Moscow is one of the pivotal characters of the game. I see that much, very plainly. The old man and the young girl I can lay my hands upon at any time, thanks to some work already done. The writer knows the League. A man wrote this note. He dashed it off on a table that was a trifle greasy like the tables of the second-class restaurants. My ally in the background comes forward secretly. He wants me to save the old man's life and the young girl's honor, to watch the passenger of the Moscow—in short, to fight this desperate invisible underground League single-handed. I've been doing that all along, my unknown friend."

Danton laughed at the end of his muttered speech and folded the warning as it was folded when discovered. Then he pulled a chair up to a table and unlocked a drawer which he could reach without getting up.

Taking a black pocketbook from the drawer he took out two fragments of a letter which he laid side by side. They did not fit, and the pieces were not alike in color, but there was a similarity in the handwriting that seemed to attract the detective.

In a little while he became absorbed in the study of the papers before him. He bent over them, held them this way and that, turned and twisted them in every direction as if bound to view them in every light.

Dan Danton had good ears, but while he was at work on the bits of paper he did not hear the feet that came up the stair from the street. If one of Nadir Bali's tigers were the visitor the steps could not have been more noiseless. They created no jar, and the person had the form of a man but the airy tread of a ghost.

At length two unusually brilliant eyes appeared above the top of the detective's door. The glass of the transom was painted in squares, but the eyes in the spy's head were keen enough to look between them. The shadow hung by his hands while he eyed the Shadow Sharp. He had a lithe body that was not heavy, for his position did not seem to tire him in the least.

When Danton finished his study of the writing, the eyes continued to regard him a few seconds longer, when their owner dropped to the floor as silently as he had drawn himself up to the transom and made off, not down the steps but back into the recesses of the corridor where there were a dozen doors and where shadows lurked as if to befriend the spy.

From his position in a doorway he saw Danton quit his quarters and go down toward the street. This seemed the very opportunity wanted by the spy.

He came down the hall as stealthily as before, stopped at the detective's door and smiled to find the room beyond as dark as Egypt.

After awhile he took a queer-looking piece of steel from his pocket. It was flexible and strong, and a few twists of it in the lock opened the way to Danton's room.

The spy closed the door carefully behind him. He did not turn on the gas, but crossed the room to the cherry desk as accurately as if the light was burning. If he had not the eyes of an owl he had the plan of the office in his head. In the dark he found the drawer from which the Shadow Sharp had taken the fragments of two letters, and the piece of steel came into use once more.

No sound escaped the thief as the drawer yielded to his key. He drew it open and thrust his hand in. In a drawer of that size it was easy for him to find the long black pocketbook. In a moment it was in his clutch, and as quickly it disappeared in his bosom. He had found the prize of the expedition!

Two minutes later this human lynx left the hall below for the street. He walked out with lowered hat and made off almost before the sharpest eye could catch sight of him.

If he had been followed he would have led his

pursuer a long chase. He did not trust himself in the street cars, although his movements told that he was in a hurry. He dodged in and out like a person anxious to reach a given place within a certain time, and at the same time desirous of avoiding certain people.

At length this person pressed a button which rung a bell in the hall of a large house shaded by two magnificent trees.

The door seemed to open of its own accord and the man passed inside. Turning to the left half-way down a long hall, he entered a sumptuously furnished parlor, in which sat a woman of striking beauty.

She seemed to start at sight of him.

"I didn't fail this time," grinned the man, at the same time tossing the pocketbook into the woman's lap. "It takes me to rob the Shadow Sharp of New York!"

The pocketbook was partly inspected in a moment.

"You must take it back," said the woman with a disappointed look.

"I risked my life to get it."

"Take it back!" was the reply.

CHAPTER III.

THE MONEY KING'S SECRET.

DAN DANTON, to all outward appearances, did not seem to care whether the City of Moscow got in or not. He had another important matter on hand, and when he left his office in the corridor he went in a direction that took him further away, all the time.

Taking a car at one of the "L" stations the Shadow Sharp was whirled up town to a part of the city where the streets had the appearance of avenues and where the dwellings indicated wealth and refinement.

He alighted at length, walked a square and rung a bell at one of the most elegant houses in the neighborhood. It was rather late for a call, but urgency was the detective's excuse and he did not hesitate.

In a little while he was ushered through a hall and into a handsome library by a man of sixty. This individual had a severe look. He was tall and straight as if he unbent to no one, and his white side-whiskers were carefully brushed out to the full lengths of the glossy hairs. He gave a slight start when he opened the front door and found the detective on the step, and Danton was taken to the library with no more welcome than the formal "good-night."

"I was not looking for you," said the elderly man, who was Lloyd Loris, a wealthy banker and a millionaire, as he dropped into the armchair he had just deserted to admit the detective.

"I presume not," was the reply. "Certain circumstances happening since sundown, bring me here."

"Have you any clew?"

The banker betrayed some anxiety in his tones, but Danton took no notice of it.

"The time has come for plain answers to several questions," he went on.

"Then you have come to put me in the witness-pen?" smiled Loris.

"For a little while."

"Wait."

The nabob rose and passed from the room. He was heard ascending the steps in the hall, and the Shadow Sharp waited patiently for his return.

When he came back his face seemed a trifle paler than before, and, taking his chair again, he waved his hand and said:

"Go on."

Danton proceeded at once.

"You told me once that, years ago, while abroad, you met a person named Sparks."

"Did I tell you that?"

"You did."

"I met the man in Paris."

"Will you tell me something about him?"

Lloyd Loris looked strangely at the detective for a moment.

"In the first place, this Sparks was never a gentleman. He was one of those Americans who disgrace their country by their doings abroad. Now, do you want me to go on?"

"Yes. I want the whole story unless it is a life secret, which is not to be revealed under any circumstances."

"It is nearly that," and Lloyd Loris leaned toward the detective with a wild gleam in his eyes.

"I killed Samson Sparks!" said he in a whisper, and with a rapid glance toward the door.

The announcement did not disturb the cool sleuth-bound in the opposite chair.

"It was in a duel, though," continued Loris. "It was on the night of the 12th of December, twenty years ago, and in the heart of one of the wooded parks of Paris. The wretch had dogged my footsteps for some days; he had been free with his insults, and when I could stand them no longer, I threw my glove in his face at the *Cafe de Mousquetaires*, and got what I had thrown for—a challenge."

"What did you fight with?" queried the detective.

"With the regulation dueling-swords," an-

swered the money king, "I was pretty expert with the blade then. We had three days for practice between the challenge and the duel, and I put in a good deal of the time with Jevasse, the professional swordsman. I did everything possible to increase my command of the weapon, for Sparks's conduct had so infuriated me that I was determined to kill him if possible.

"Which you did?"

"Yes. Strange to say, I am the only living participant in that midnight affair of honor. The two seconds were afterward killed in duels, and one of the surgeons committed suicide; the other was drowned in Lake Geneva. Sparks was my match with the sword, having practiced with Javette, Jevasse's rival in that line; but, I believe that if he had been Javette himself, with all that swordmaster's skill, I should have run him through just the same."

"You ran him through, then?"

"Through the left breast. For an instant Sparks left his heart uncovered, and I took advantage of his fault. The devil was in me, and lent cunning and power to my movements. In a flash I had my point at his breast, and while I wiped the blade Samson Sparks lay gasping on the snow. The affray did not last long, but it was very warm. His attendants took the body away, and the next day my second told me all about the secret burial of my antagonist in a neglected corner of one of the out-of-the-way cemeteries of Paris. You will now understand why I went up-stairs before giving you the story," smiled the banker in conclusion. "It is a secret which I have zealously kept from Floy's ears. The child's blood would freeze with horror if she knew that the blood of a human being was on my hands. Claude does not know the secret. The only man that shares it with me is a 'professional' with whom I have no communication. He is not one of those people who interfere in one's private affairs. I never see him, for we do not move in the same sphere."

Dan Danton, the detective, had listened attentively to the banker's story of the duel.

"Now, Mr. Loris," said he, "have you ever thought that the woman in the case may be at work against you in New York?"

Loris seemed to recoil.

"What! the woman whose name passed between us that night at the *cafe*?"

"Yes."

"She's dead."

"Dead, Mr. Loris?"

"Dead," was the echo. "I am not going to ask how you learned that the beauty, Therese Talcott, was in any way mixed up in the unfortunate affair; but it is your business to follow secret trails and to bring dark things into the light. The woman—she was at the height of her beauty then—was a passing fancy, and, as such, held me in thrall for a time. I was never aware that she knew anything about the duel, for I met her afterward, and she seemed to know nothing of it. Yes, as I have said, 'the woman in the case,' as you call her, is dead. She came to this country and took her own life, three years after the duel, in this city. I never met her after bidding her good-by in Paris."

"But the threatening letters?" persisted the detective. "They certainly refer to the secret you have kept so well."

The millionaire made no reply.

"I have compared the fragments," continued Danton. "I have viewed them from every standpoint."

"Well, what have you made out?"

"They come from the same source—are the work of the same person."

"Why haven't you gone on and unearthed the League of the Hidden Hands?"

"I am now on the trail."

"The plot is to extort money from me by threatening to disclose the duel and all my past to Floy. The villains know where I am vulnerable. They know where the shaft will draw the most blood. While I think that Floy would refuse to believe aught against me, I cannot hear of these secrets getting out."

"But if Therese is dead—if all the actors in the duel save yourself have gone to the grave—who would write the letters?"

"Ah! there is where I am left in the dark whenever I think!" exclaimed Loris. "I can get to that point without difficulty, but not beyond it. I employed you to go further, Captain Danton—to get at the bottom of this conspiracy, for the signature at the end of the letters proclaims its existence. But four nights since didn't I find a letter on my steps bearing the strange mark of two hands partially hidden behind a dagger-pierced heart? I want all the money I have made to go to the beautiful girl up-stairs, but I am asked to empty it into the hungry hopper of the blackmailer. Why, sooner than permit Floy to know the truth, I'd walk to yon desk, take out a revolver and scatter my brains about this room!"

Lloyd Loris spoke with stern determination.

"I ask again, what have you discovered?" he went on. "Are you really on the trail of the Hidden Hands?"

"I am," answered Danton, returning his look. "You have been fair with me to-night. Let me be the same to you. I am as sure that

Therese Talcott is alive as you are that she is dead."

A cry which he could not suppress broke over the nabob's lips. His face grew white and livid by turns.

"Alive? That woman?" he exclaimed.

"Alive," calmly answered the detective.

"It cannot be! People who have been dead nearly twenty years don't rise to plague one with a long-buried secret."

"I admit that. If Therese Talcott is alive to-day, as a matter of course she has at no time been dead."

"Certainly," smiled Loris. "But by heavens! you make my blood run cold. Wait!"

The millionaire left the room and again ascended the stairs to a door at whose keyhole he listened a few moments.

"She knows nothing of this, thank God!" said he, coming back into the library.

It was plain that he was thoroughly unnerved.

"I infer from your revelation that Therese Talcott is connected with the Hidden League," he went on.

"I have not said so," answered Danton.

"No, but one can draw his own conclusions. I cannot—will not—believe this without proof."

"Shall I produce Therese?"

"In Heaven's name, no!" cried Loris. "If she is alive—if she is the same adventuress she was *then*, with my secret in her hands, I wouldn't have her cross my threshold for all my wealth. Do you ever kill anybody, Danton? No! what am I saying? You are no assassin. My God! to think of a secret League against me with that creature at its head!"

He got up and paced the room, watched by the detective in every move and turn.

"Danton, I give you three days in which to run the League of the Hidden Hands to earth!" said he, pausing suddenly before the Shadow Sharp, into whose arms his fingers sunk. "Go this moment to the trail! If you find the witch of the *cafes* watch her, don't let her cross my step. Hire a man whom you can trust. You know what I mean. Hire a man I say, and let him do the deed with unfailing hand. I could kill the viper as I killed Samson Sparks. I—"

A wild cry at that moment rung through the library. It was followed by a heavy fall, and when the two men went into the hall they found a beautiful young woman in a swoon at the foot of the stair!

CHAPTER IV.

DANTON STRIKES A TRAIL.

"Go to your work!" cried Lloyd Loris, looking at the detective with the form of the white-robed girl at his feet. "Let us hope that she fell without hearing a single word of my last terrible sentence. You are to unearth the League of the Hidden Hands. If Therese Talcott is alive, you are to run her down, and if you won't finish her career of conspiracy, send me a man that will. Your hunting-ground is beyond that door. Go, Danton, and don't forget for a moment that you carry with you the peace and happiness of two souls."

Danton saw Loris lift the limp body from the floor ere he turned from the scene, and a moment afterward, he was going down the street under the trees that stretched their leafy arms toward the homes of the wealthy.

"I wormed one of his secrets out of him," said Danton to himself. "The man he ran through in Paris may be no more dead than Therese Talcott. I thought I could startle him. The chances are that the girl heard more than he thinks. No one knows how long she had been on the stair before she fell. The interruption was thrilling, coming when it did, and I started a little myself when I saw Floy lying on her face in the hall. Lloyd Loris is right. My hunting-ground is the streets of New York. Now is a good time for my secret ally, whoever he is, to step forward with advice and information. He knows the identity of the passenger on the City of Moscow—the man with the shaggy brows and the scar under the left eyelid; I can but guess."

Danton did not halt until he had reached the down-town office of Corker & Cuttle. A faint all-night light burned over Butler's desk, but the bookkeeper had gone home as if he had given up hopes of hearing from the overdue steamer any more that night.

The Shadow Sharp walked to another ship-owner's office and there found a clerk closing his ledger for the night. The door was locked but the bookkeeper came forward at Danton's knock.

"We've closed, sir," said he to the detective.

"I see, but I'm only after a bit of information," was the reply.

"About the Moscow, eh?"

"Yes."

"She's out yonder," rejoined the clerk, nodding toward the bay.

"How did the news get in?"

"Telegraphed from Sandy Hook, sir, besides a tug brought up dispatches. I presume it was the tug Harbor Sprite. She's been running about off Sandy Hook these two days looking for the Moscow."

The New York detective thanked the book-

keeper and turned away. The information was just what he wanted.

He went at once down to the pier and found the Harbor Sprite there.

"She's come at last!" exclaimed a man at sight of Danton's figure, stepping out of the pier office doorway. "I've sent word to Corker & Cuttle that the Moscow's in. A broken shaft and some heavy seas did the business for her."

"I wanted to tow her up to-night," he went on, "but her captain thought best to wait the tide in the morning. I brought off several passengers, however—gentlemen whose business interests were suffering, you know."

"Three gentlemen, you say?"

The tugman seemed to make a, to him, startling discovery at that moment.

"Your pardon," exclaimed he, "but ain't you a detective?"

Danton had to smile at the drollery of the man's face when he put the question.

"What if I am?" he asked.

"But are you, though?"

"Yes."

"And you're looking for somebody by the Moscow?"

"Perhaps."

"Of course you are, or you wouldn't be here. Well, I don't aid or abet crime if I can help it, but you see the gentlemen wanted to come off, and the captain had no objections, and—and so I brought 'em in."

"You are in no wise to blame," responded Danton. "What were the men like?"

"One was an up-town merchant named Benton. I know him; no crookedness there."

"He isn't the man, captain."

"The other was a Frenchman who controls a big restaurant on Broadway."

"Monsieur Fricassee, as the men about town call him?"

"That's the fellow!"

"Now for your third passenger."

"The truth is, I didn't get to see much of him. He was tall, well built, and carried himself like a gentleman. Had no luggage but a hand-sachet. He seemed to keep in the shadows of my boat, and was the first to disappear when I touched the dock. Never saw a man vanish like that before. If the merchant and the restaurateur hadn't convinced me that he had made off, on foot, I should have thought he had dropped quietly into the water."

"Didn't you get a glimpse of his face at all?" queried Danton.

"Only once."

"Had his eyes shaggy brows?"

"They had. I noticed that."

"And a scar under the left lower lid?"

"I could not say. He kept in the dark, you know. I guess your man has escaped you."

The Gotham detective did not admit that he had been outwitted. In secret he was compelled to acknowledge that the man against whom he had been warned had reached the city without passing inspection. It was an unsatisfactory ending to his journey to the wharves, but he was not discouraged.

"A man is never lost to a detective," he said to the tugman, who was waiting for him to continue. "If you will consider this interview confidential, I shall be obliged to you."

"I don't peddle such things, captain," and the captain of the Harbor Sprite touched his hat to Danton as the latter turned away, and once more his rapid feet beat time on the stones.

The favorite motto of the Shadow Sharp being: "When a trail is fresh never lose it," he soon afterward appeared in the vicinity of a house on a quiet street. If he had come earlier in the evening he would have seen a boy run up the steps, ring, and be admitted. He would have seen a man wait outside like a spy, and follow the boy when he came out, and, later still, he might have seen a man flit into the house with a small traveling sachet in his grasp.

Danton knew that the occupant of the house was a woman whose beauty had won for her a certain reputation in certain parts of the city. In short, she was the person supposed to be Therese Talcott, the Queen of the League of the Hidden Hands conspiracy, operating against Lloyd Loris, the millionaire. She was Cora Catlin to the world in which she moved, as if her name had never been Therese, but the cunning and perseverance of the Shadow Sharp had drawn aside in part the veil that hid her past, though he had not fairly found the trail to the secret halls of the Hidden Hands.

For some time Danton studied the house, whose front shutters were closely drawn. He felt that the silent passenger who had come off in the tug from the city of Moscow was then in the house, and he would have given much to have been permitted to cross the threshold.

Leaning against the trunk of one of the trees, the Shadow Sharp watched the house as if confident that, sooner or later, its door would open and let out one of its secrets.

He was at last rewarded, but the person who came down the steps was barely five feet in height—a striking contrast to the mysterious person described by the captain of the tug.

Danton saw the figure come toward him with a step that made no more noise than that of a

cat, and, hugging the tree, but with one hand ready to fly at the unknown should he be discovered, he eyed him closely.

"That is the fellow who stole glances at me a night or two ago in the Park!"

"He is agile enough to be the Mercury of the League, and powerful enough to play panther when wanted for a panther's duty."

The detective followed.

"What! into my preserves?" he exclaimed, a few minutes later when he saw the little body dodge into the hallway that led up to his own quarters. "Have the two heads in Cora's house sent this fellow on a mission against me? Let me catch him at work! The Hidden Hands don't want me on the trail. I already know that. Is the man with the noiseless tread their messenger of swift and secret death?"

The detective slipped into the hallway and drew his shoes. The stairs were wide, but he resolved that nothing should pass him while he went up.

It did not take Danton long to reach the top, and he tiptoed along the wall to his door.

"The rat is in my cheese-box!" exclaimed the Vidocq, after listening a minute with his ear at the keyhole. "He knows what he wants and where to look for it from the noises I hear in the dark. Cora, I am going to surprise your thief and spy."

The next moment Danton slid a key into the lock, gave it a quick twist, opened the door, slipped inside and shut the portal—almost in the space of a second.

The detective's entrance was followed by the most profound silence. He was unseen in the darkness of the room, and he could not make out a single object. All he had to do to change this was to reach up and touch the button of the electric light globe, but he hesitated.

He did not know where the spy was, nor how armed while he waited for the first flash of light. It seemed to Danton that a knife was gliding toward him, now from one side, now from the other. He even thought he could hear a lynx-like step across the floor.

All at once a noise shattered all this. It was at the window.

As the sash went up the detective sprung across the room and tried to check the course of the object that leaped across the sill. Quick as he was he was not quick enough, and when he looked down upon the sidewalk he saw the spy running away.

CHAPTER V.

THE HIDDEN HANDS.

A LONG chamber apparently underground.

The walls are of dark smooth stone. Here and there upon them hang square banners upon each of which is shown a heart transfixed by a dagger, while partly hidden by the device are a pair of hands. The work is well done and the natural coloring of the heart makes the novice shudder.

At one end of the room is a raised platform carpeted and occupied by a throne-like chair. In the center is an oval table covered with green baize with the design on the banners worked therein in scarlet thread. Around two sides of the place are chairs at certain distances apart, in all, twelve in number. The floor is covered with a heavy matting which yields slightly to the foot and breaks its sound; the ceiling is somber in hue and unrelieved by design of any kind.

In short, the place briefly described is the tribunal chamber of the League with which we are to have much to do in the course of our story, whose workings we are to see here and there, whose nerve, cunning and determination will often confront the reader.

It is ten o'clock at night when a door at the end of the chamber opposite the raised seat opens and admits a woman, magnificently clad.

Her pink arms—magnificent ones they are, too—are bared to the shoulder, where they are met by the purple velvet of her bodice. Her yellow dress sweeping over the floor behind her is grand enough to be worn by a princess and her carriage is that of the reigning scion of a noble house.

As to her face we can say nothing beyond the remark that her chin, all we can see, is exquisitely molded. The rest is covered by a mask of black velvet upon which, in silver thread, is done the same device that shows itself on the banners.

The unknown, who is tall and faultless in contour, mounts the dais and stands erect between the throne-chair and the little stand. One of her hands goes up and pulls a cord that hangs from the ceiling.

Instantly a door in the side wall opens and a man, wearing a black mask similarly worked, marches into the room. He is followed by eleven others. The dark eyes behind the mask on the platform seem to get a sudden sparkle as they behold the twelve who have dropped into the chairs along the walls.

"The conclave of the Hidden Hand is open," announced the woman mask, and as one man the twelve responded:

"It is open! Let the eyes of the spy wither in his head, and his heart forever cease to beat!"

For a moment silence has possession of the place.

"Brethren of the League," speaks its queen once more. "The feet of the spy is upon our track and his eye is on the alert. The Hidden Hand must assert its power, and the path must be cleared. As we have written before so must we write again. This time two enemies must feel the point of the death symbol of our illustrious Order. Again our ranks are full. The missing member whose chair has been vacant so long once more fills his old place and his hand is ready to follow the commands of the fatal balls. He comes back to us equipped for the fray. He has brought from afar the proof which will line our purses with the curse of the world. But, just when we find ourselves ready to play the golden cord, the spy steps forward, his noiseless feet and keen eye appear in our path. We must brush him aside. The balls have been prepared. Two of them contain commands which must be carried out. Nothing must daunt the drawer of the ballots. He must go straight to his prey as the arrow goes to the target from the unerring bow. Is the League ready?"

"We are ready!" came the response spoken as if but one tongue had answered.

The Queen of the League descended from the dais and advanced to the table. Lifting from it the small square box that occupied the center she threw back the lid and presented it to the nearest man on the right. In a moment a black-gloved hand slipped into the box and drew something out.

The masked woman passed to the next brother who also drew a small wooden sphere from the box; thence around the room she passed, until every man had drawn out a ball, leaving but one in the coffer.

"I take the last one," said she, lifting out the ball as she spoke and replacing the box upon the table, after which she went back to her chair where she confronted the League with her queenly figure proudly erect.

"Let the holders of the commands of the League keep the secret and do their duty," she went on. "The enemy in the way will grow stronger unless cut down now. He was watched last night—tracked by one of our number who was forced to make a hazardous leap to save his life. The League cannot succeed with the foe at large. We have played with velvet long enough. From its depths must now come the claws of steel—the hidden avengers of our Order. Once more I caution obedience, cunning and secrecy. We have startled Gotham before—baffling her secret shadowers and puzzling the most astute. The hand again comes out from behind the heart! It takes up the dagger for cause, and leaves the victim powerless to interfere with our triumph!"

A subdued sound of applause from the black gloves replied to the masked queen's speech and the next moment the chamber of the League was wrapped in darkness.

This state of things lasted for several moments when the light came back, revealing twelve empty chairs along the wall. The members of the secret League of New York had departed with the same silence that had marked their entrance.

The only occupant of the chamber was the woman. After surveying the changed scene before her she descended from the chair and went over to the table. The box was there, open.

Bending over it she counted the wooden balls therein—ten in all. Three were missing, but she soon reduced the number to two by dropping another into the box.

"Now let the enemy look out!" said she in a voice of triumph. "The hands of the death League of Gotham never strike twice. They never fail to find and nothing holds them back. Be on your guard, Daniel Danton. Look behind you when you thread the streets by day and by night, but all your watchfulness will avail nothing! Unchain your striped guards, Nadir Bali, charlatan and spy! Keep the fierce Nina at your heels; but, even then the claws she carries under the velvet cannot long hold off the silent dagger of the Hidden Hand. I wonder if one of the balls fell to his lot? He would come and share fortune with the rest. If he has been commissioned woe to the man against whom he is pitted!"

The Queen of the League looked around the room as if to see that nothing bad been left behind by the Hidden Hands; then she left by the door at the end of the hall, the light going out with the closing of the portal behind her.

Meantime the members of the League had reached the street, one by one, where each had vanished in the direction that seemed to suit his inclination most. No two went away together, as if there were twelve secrets abroad, one in each heart.

One of these men was a tall and handsomely made personage, whose face as shown by a lamp under which he passed would have marked him forty years of age.

If the captain of the tug Harbor Sprite could have seen him he might have recognized him as the silent passenger brought in from the newly arrived City of Moscow, the night before.

He was the same! There were the heavy

brows and the small crescent-shaped scar under the left lower eyelid. There were also peculiar hands with soft fingers, long and flexible, which the tugman would have recognized, too, for he had noticed his passengers' hands—even studied them as if to make up for his failure to stare at his face.

With a quick, nervous tread this man, fresh from the hall of the Hidden Hands, plunged into the first left-hand street that offered itself. He walked some distance through its shadows, making a shadow of himself as much as possible when, all at once, he entered an alley and knocked at a door in a peculiar manner.

In a short time he found himself face to face with a young girl not past sixteen though she looked older. She stared at him as she drew back, undecided whether to invite him or to ask if he had not knocked at the wrong door.

"I'm right, miss," smiled the man, pushing forward. "Tell your father that I'm in the parlor. First door to the left isn't it?"

"Don't you know? Haven't you heard?" exclaimed the girl getting pale as she came toward him.

"Haven't I heard what?"

"Father is in prison, sir!"

The look of the man instantly became a stare of mingled disappointment and surprise.

"What? Did they run him in for something not exactly in keeping with the laws they make nowadays?" he exclaimed. "How long has he been gone?"

"Six months."

The girl appeared not to have noticed the first question.

"Couldn't he keep his hands out of mischief till I came back?"

"I don't believe father was as guilty as they said. He was convicted on the testimony of a man who lives with a lot of wild beasts, and—"

"What's that?" broke in the man, darting forward. "Do you say that a wild-beast-tamer convicted your father?"

"I said that," and the girl's eyes lit up with a mad light. "Father told him, ere they took him off, that they'd square accounts one of these days."

"Gods! I wish your father's time was out to-night!" cried the man with the crescent scar.

"When does he come out, Nelly?"

"Not before next spring."

"Unless he escapes."

"Can he do that?" cried the girl, brightening with hope for a moment.

"They take French leave sometimes, the convicts do, but not often enough to give me hopes of seeing Paul Pollen to-night. I'm sorry to have disturbed you, Nelly; here, take this," and a piece of gold fell into the girl's palm.

In another moment the man was again on the street.

"I must do the deed myself," he muttered. "Pollen has a grudge against the tiger-tamer. He is the very man I want!"

CHAPTER VI.

DEATH ON THE STAIR.

THE person who walked from the house inhabited by Nelly, the convict's daughter, was the holder of one of the two fatal balls picked from the box in the hall of the League of the Hidden Hands.

If he did not want to shift to other shoulders the task assigned him, why had he visited the house in the alley? Where had he been during the last six months, that he had not heard that Paul had gone "up the river" for murderously assaulting a man whose pockets he had picked in front of the "Garden" where Nadir Bali was performing with his tigers?

Pollen was a bad man, with a large acquaintance. There were some who believed that the child, Nelly, was not his daughter, but they dared not tell the thief so to his face. The two had inhabited the alley for years, and when Paul went to prison to serve out a much shorter term than he deserved, he made the girl promise that she would not change her quarters before his return.

Thus far she had kept her word. During the day she made some money selling papers, but nightfall always found her indoors—the result of promise number two to the man who was away. In spite of his own reputation, Paul Pollen wanted to keep the girl puffed.

The caller seemed to realize what he had missed when Nelly told him that the convict owed his misfortunes to the tiger-tamer, and that is why he growled and cursed his ill luck for two squares up the street.

He did not know that he had both interested and mystified Nelly Pollen. If he had looked back, which he did not do, he might have seen the figure that flitted after him, keeping away from the light and in the shadows of the buildings.

The girl's curiosity had caused her to break her word, at last. For the first time after dark since her father's conviction, she was on the streets of New York with her eyes watching the strange man, wondering who he was and where he could have been that he had not heard of the trial and conviction.

Nelly shared her father's hatred of the tiger-tamer. She had often gone past Nadir's house

in hopes of telling him by her eyes that she wished he was in Paul's place, or devoured by the beasts that brought him money and fame. Once or twice she saw the faces of the tigers at the windows looking out through the shutters, but the tiger king she never got to see.

Somehow or other she thought that the strange caller hated Nadir also. Was it because his testimony had sent her father up?

She tried to solve the problem while she followed the man up one street and down another, until she found herself half-way across the city, and in a quarter almost entirely strange to her.

All at once the stranger executed a short cut which brought him into a street which the girl recognized with an exclamation of surprise. She was within a square of Nadir Bali's house!

"There's some connection between that man and the Bengalese," exclaimed Nelly, still eying the figure, which she had not lost for a moment. "If he has not been in the city for six months he knows how to find certain places. I wonder if father was expecting this person to call during his term? He never told me about him."

The member of the secret League kept on until he came opposite the abode of the tiger-master. He seemed to find the house without any difficulty; he might have been aided by the illuminated number on the transom, but then the house of Nadir and his pets was too well known not to be easily located by the casual observer.

Nelly saw the man draw off among the shadows, out of the glare of an electric globe, half a square further down, and survey the house. He looked like a burglar seeking a place at which to begin operations; but, while the girl thought thus, she could not conceive how any one could summon courage sufficient to cross the tiger-guarded step of the dark-skinned man of power and mystery.

"I believe he is going in!" cried Nelly seeing the stranger walk toward the house. "No, he has changed his mind. He thinks of the three tigers—Nepaul, Nero and Nina—the world knows their names."

In another minute the spectral figure of the Moscow's passenger was leaning against the tree directly in front of the door. Nelly was near enough, screened by a tree herself, to see his every movement.

"They're kept up-stairs in their cages, so, why not go ahead?" she heard him say addressing himself. "If I had found Pollen there would not be the present risk on my part. The tiger-tamer is not at home at this hour. If I knew where to find him—Pish! what should hold me back? They don't know I'm in the city. The ship's passenger list covers my trail. I took good care of that. We can't move to success without the two plays ordered by the filled spheres. To-night in yonder; to-morrow up-town among the old enemy's millions. I'm going ahead. Let me see—three tigers, and one man. I don't have to kill the former. I can wait in the house until Nadir comes, then—another Hidden Hand mystery for Gotham."

Nelly, the convict's daughter, did not hear all his words, but she caught enough of them to let her guess the rest—to finish sentences and bridge others.

"That man, whoever he is, would have sent my papa into that house if he had found him!" thought she. "He is going to strike a blow against the man with the tigers. He must not be too sure about their being chained up-stairs. People say that they have the freedom of the house. Ah! if they have and should find him inside, what will not happen?"

The member of the Hidden Hands was on the step and Nelly saw him bending toward the door upon whose lock he seemed to be working like a burglar.

The girl watched him with conflicting thoughts. She felt that a man with the cool courage he was showing ought to be told what the neighborhood said about the showman's tigers, but before she could decide to go forward and warn him, she was sure to say:

"He would have forced papa into the house. I'm sure he would," and then she would let the man in the shadows go on with his work.

He stopped, all at once, drew back and dropped something into his pocket. At the same time he took something from his bosom and held it along his sleeve. To the watchful girl it looked very much like a knife.

Another minute had not passed when she saw the man enter the tiger-tamer's house. As the door closed behind him she sprung forward and reached the steps in time to hear the lock click, locking the cool head in.

If she could have looked beyond the door she might have seen the man adjust a half-mask upon his face. This concealed his features from the eyes to the mouth, the lower edge of the mask falling slightly below the lips. Thus disguised he looked up the stairs as if half-expecting the velvet-footed tigers to come down to welcome him. He held along his sleeve the glittering and needle-pointed knife whose hilt was of foreign make and resembled the hilt of a stiletto.

An all-night gas jet was burning in the hall between the balustrade and the wall. It gave out light enough to show him the half-opened

door of Nadir's parlor beyond which, separated by a heavy curtain, was his couch.

After awhile the man entered the parlor.

"Let me make sure that the tiger king is not at home, then I can arrange my ambush and bide my time in patience. If the brother who is to deal with Danton the Shadow Sharp is making headway like this, by Jove! he is to be congratulated."

The arras was parted, and the light showed him the unoccupied bed.

"My old friend Nadir has prospered!" he laughed, looking round upon the sumptuousness of the joined rooms. "Tiger-shows must be a success in New York. I knew Nadir when he had no money-banks in striped skins. How he hoodwinks these people. A Bengalese, eh? You old impostor, I could tear off the mask and show you up in a new light to your hoodwinked patrons. I think I shall do that in a note left on the table for the tigers to growl over, and the people to wonder at."

Five minutes afterward the man in the tiger-tamer's house went to the door to look up the stair once more.

In spite of his information that the three animals were kept caged on the second floor during the master's absence, he seemed to have a lurking fear.

"If the monsters should be at large—gods!" he exclaimed as he leant into the hall, and looked at the landing above.

Why did he keep his gaze uplifted longer than time sufficient to show him that the coast overhead was clear?

The man of the League saw something he had not seen before.

With a sudden chill in his blood he leant a little further into the hall, clutching his knife with renewed firmness.

Where there was nothing ten minutes before there was now the head and shoulders of a gigantic tiger. The light of the gas-jet passing beyond the balustrade, threw upon the wall a figure as hideous as the substance itself.

The assassin seemed drawn into the spell of the fiery eyeballs at the top of the steps. He knew that he could not reach and unlock the door before the tiger, bounding through space, could descend upon him with tooth and claw!

A man in certain perils thinks rapidly. The one in the showman's door did so.

He gave the tiger's head a parting glance and drew back, but, the next moment, he heard a soft fall, and looked over his shoulder.

Horror! the tiger was half-way down the stair, but he was not alone. His head was pressed against the railing, and it was flanked on either side by a similar visage!

"To Hades with the lying lips that told me the tigers were chained and caged!" muttered the man of the League. "In a moment I will have the three upon me. Where is the door? I must get it between me and the jungle plagues."

He risked his life in leaping across the space between him and the heavy parlor door. He caught it with a pair of eager hands and shut it in the tigers' faces.

This act was followed by a roar of rage, and the man ground his teeth and laughed!

CHAPTER VII.

NADIR AND NELLY.

"Now I must put more than a door between me and Nadir's pets," thought the member of the League, while he listened to the deep growls beyond the panels. "I can't wait for the tiger king under the present circumstances. I must look for him elsewhere," and then with a smile he added: "I wonder how the holder of the other hollow ball has fared?"

It was natural even at that time for him to think of the man who had drawn the sphere which held a command for the removal of Danton the detective.

The city Vidocq had no tigers to defend his house when he was absent. The assassin who went after him would not find three terrible heads on the stair, each armed with a pair of blazing eyeballs and two rows of shining teeth.

Meantime the tigers in the hall were growling at the door and eying it madly. They struck the adjacent wall with their tails and gnashed their teeth till the solitary man beyond heard them crack.

He no longer held the knife along his sleeve. His weapon was now a heavy six-shooter which was clutched firmly in his right hand, and with it he seemed a match for the three tigers on the outside.

"I bid you good-night!" he suddenly laughed, shrugging his shoulders. "You won't get to feast on my blood, and I will not finish Nadir in his den. But elsewhere—elsewhere, my three jungle man-eaters. You lose your best friend before long—probably before morning."

He crossed the room into the tiger-tamer's sleeping apartment and kept on to the window.

Drawing the curtains aside he raised the sash and crossed the sill.

The next moment he dropped to the ground in the rear of the house and remained in the shadows for a minute.

"Better luck next time if I have to come back here!" he exclaimed, before quitting the spot.

"I won't go back to her until I've done something. This is nothing!"

A few feet from the tiger-tamer's front door a dark figure appeared on the sidewalk and walked up the street.

Nelly, the convict's daughter, was no longer on the watch. As we know she had followed the man of the League to the house, but the growls of the tigers had frightened her away and she had fled believing that the animals had made short work of the person who had dared so much.

The girl did not return to the house in the alley, but kept on toward a part of the city with which she was very familiar by day.

She knew a member of the city press—a young fellow of nineteen who had done her more than one good turn since her father's conviction.

Nelly thought to find the young reporter and give an account of her adventure. She knew that he would be able to turn it to account with his facile pencil, and it would help her in her sales during the next day.

Dick Clayton was generally accessible at the office of the paper he represented. The girl knew from what he had told her that at that very hour he was apt to be at his desk writing out his "pick-up."

Entering the building she went straight to the counter and asked for Dick.

"Just went out," said the young man whom she addressed at the same time glancing up at the clock. "He wouldn't be gone five minutes, he said. "Ought to be back now. Won't you wait?"

Yes, her business with Dick was important and she would wait.

Nelly stepped back to make room for another inquirer and dropped into a handy chair.

Nearly every second she looked at the clock.

All at once a man came bustling in, and advancing to the counter threw a small cord upon it.

Nelly started when she saw this person, and she felt that she had grown pale.

Nadir Bali, the tiger-tamer, stood before her!—the man who had convicted her father, and from whose house she had come with a bit of news startling enough for the most prosaic reporter.

Nelly looked at the handsome showman while she shrank closer to the wall. She wondered what he would say if he should see her. It was hardly possible that he had forgotten her because he saw her often at her father's trial, and she had told him in a moment of excitement, and with flashing eyes, that she would pay him back for sending the pickpocket up the river.

For several moments Nelly studied the figure of Nadir with a mind full of conflicting emotions. She could startle him with her story of the assassin in his house, but he might turn from her the moment he should recognize her. Nadir Bali was not supposed to have to do with the child of a convicted thief.

As the tiger-tamer turned from the counter, Nelly's breast was thrilled by the entrance of the friend for whom she had waited.

She did not spring forward with a cry of joy, for the showman was still too near, but the quick, roving eye of Dick Clayton ferreted her out in her corner.

"I declare, Nelly, what has turned up to make a night owl of you?" exclaimed the reporter, springing toward her.

She felt compelled to rise at this greeting, and as she did so, she met the rapid glance of the tiger king.

Recognition was instantaneous. Nelly knew it would be so.

"Pardon me, but isn't this Nelly?" asked Nadir, coming toward the pair.

"You ought to know me!" exclaimed the girl, her figure seeming to increase in stature as the words left her tongue.

"I do know you, and I've thought of you often since."

"You need not refer to that," answered Nelly, flushing. "You know I don't—cannot like you, Captain Nadir, as they call you."

Instead of getting angry, the tiger-tamer smiled, but did not retreat.

"I hope it will do your father good, but don't let us talk of that," said he, his voice as soft as a child's, and sympathetic. "I want you to come to my show. I will send you word when I give another exhibition. I'll make my pets perform some wonderful feats not on the bills for your benefit. Where do you live, Nelly? Ah! never mind. I can reach you through your young friend here. I happen to know Mr. Clayton. Good-night."

There was something about the master of the tigers that touched Nelly. What if the assassin in his house should kill the beasts, and then lie in wait for him? She did not hate him enough to want him cut down by the dirk of a night thug. No, she could not bring her heart to that.

With his kind "good-night," Nadir turned and walked out.

"Call him back, Dick!" exclaimed Nelly. "He sent my father to prison, but maybe he thought he was doing his duty. I don't want the man in his house to kill him when he goes home."

"The man in his house?"

"Yes, yes."

"What do you know about him?"

"I saw him enter."

"When?"

"Not an hour ago. But, call the tiger tamer back. He will be out of your reach in a moment."

"I'll bring him in," cried Dick, and, rushing from the office he overtook the so-called Bengal half a block away.

Nelly's black eyes expanded with pleasure when she saw the man of the tigers once more before her.

Dick had kept his word.

"So you want to tell me something, eh?" smiled Nadir. "I'm always willing to listen to you, Nelly. What is it, child?"

The three retired to the remotest corner of the counting-room, where the convict's daughter, looking up into Nadir Bali's face, told her adventure in a few words.

Dick Clayton, the reporter, showed more excitement than the man who listened to Nelly's narrative.

His face did not betray his thoughts and fears, if fears he had.

"You did not know the man, Nelly?" asked Nadir, when the girl had finished.

"No. He knew father, but his face was strange to me."

"You had it in the light, had you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well?"

"He would be very handsome if it were not for his heavy eyebrows and—"

"And what else, Nelly?"

Nadir Bali had for the first time shown some eagerness.

"And a small red scar under his left eye."

"A crescent-shaped scar, my child?"

"Yes. I saw it plainly enough to mark its shape."

Nadir looked surprised.

"On my track in a hurry," said he under his breath. "He has hardly had time to get second wind. The League must have had a meeting, or she has lunched him at her foil without the ceremony of a formal ballot. In my house with my pets? By Jove, Samson Sparks, you have nerves of steel!"

"What are you going to do?" asked the reporter. "If your tigers have finished this night-bird, I'd like to get "the scoop" on the other boys."

"You would, would you?" laughed Nadir, looking down into Dick's brilliant eyes. "I think that Nelly came here for the purpose of giving you "the scoop," as you call it."

"I did," confessed Nelly, with a smile and a blush.

"Come, then, both of you. I'll show you how I protect my house when I'm away; but you must promise to publish all or nothing, just as I decide."

"Forge ahead and consider the promise out," replied the reporter. "We don't get on to a sensation like this very often. Come, Nelly."

The three left the newspaper office, and Nadir led the young pair to the nearest "L" station.

"Do you think you know the man in your house?" asked Dick, bending toward the tiger king.

"Know him? From the ground up—inside and out!" was the quick response. "Why, that man has crossed the sea to find my tigers on guard. He was to have been watched at the wharf by the best trail-sharp in New York, but he has stolen a march on him. We shall see how he forced in Captain Nadir's city jungle. I almost wish the cats have spared him."

"Why so?"

"To cheat you out of a sensation and to prolong the game, ha, ha!"

A few minutes later, Nadir Bali opened his front door, and in the light of the hall jet, the three tigers leaped upon him with cries of delight.

"There's no blood on their faces!" he laughed, looking at his companions. "The man with the scar has escaped for the present!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE QUEEN OF THE GAME.

CORA Catlin, the beautiful woman whom we have introduced to the reader, was the Queen of the Hidden Hands. She was playing a deep and desperate game for the ruin of both Lloyd Loris, the millionaire banker, and the young girl whom he called daughter.

She was also Therese Talcott, the same woman who, years before, had caused the duel in the Parisian park, on which occasion Loris believed he had killed his man.

The banker was firm in his belief that Therese was dead. The report had reached him through credible sources and he rested easy feeling that the secret of the duel was his own, that Floy would never know that her father had once fought with and killed a fellow-man for the fickle love of an adventuress.

Loris had married since the duel. At one time he thought seriously of remaining single all his life, but Floy's mother crossed his path and he fell a victim to her persuasive beauty and made her his wife.

At the opening of our story Mrs. Loris had been dead many years. Indeed, Floy had never felt her warm caresses, for when the child opened her eyes upon the new world the mother shut hers upon it forever.

Lloyd Loris watched over his orphaned child with the greatest care. He seemed to live for her alone; he toiled among the money marts building up fortune after fortune for the sole purpose of making her happy as one of the youngest heiresses in America.

In time he forgot Therese Talcott, Samson Sparks and the duel in Paris. He was one of the few really happy money nabobs of the world.

If he had known that Therese was in Gotham under a new name he would have trembled for the secret's safety. He did not dream of such a thing.

By and by, however, he began to suspicion that a game of some kind was being played against him. He received from different sources letters containing vague hints. At first he treated them with contempt, threw them away and laughed, but they soon told him that the writer knew something about his past.

At length he became convinced that a conspiracy was tightening its folds about him. There could be no mistake. The keen eyes he sometimes encountered on the street, the studied hints of the letters, the steps he heard behind him whenever he went out, these and a thousand and one other signs told him that he was in a web.

This is how Danton the Shadow Sharp came to be drawn into the game against the banker.

"Run the conspirators to earth and I'll make you so rich that you won't have to risk your life on any more trails," said he to the detective at the first interview, and from that hour Danton was Lloyd Loris's trail-hound.

He discovered that Cora Catlin the splendid-looking woman who occupied the elegant up-town mansion was at the head of the plot against the nabob. He picked up one by one and by means which need no explanation here the dropped stitches in the woman's life. He found that she was a born adventuress, that when in her teens she had robbed and ruined, and that she was a queen of blackmailers as well as Queen of the Hidden Hands.

In short Danton discovered that Cora Catlin had been Therese Talcott, that in early life—she was but five and forty now though thirty was the limit she looked—her path and Loris's had crossed; but it remained for the banker to tell how, as we have heard from his own lips.

If the woman was not dead there was a likelihood that Samson Sparks had not lost his life at the point of the banker's sword.

Danton saw the grip Cora had upon Loris. The secret he had guarded so well all those years was in her hands. She knew that he had fought a duel which would disgrace him in the eyes of his idolized child.

He had fought it for her (Cora) at that time a mere adventuress who was the talk of Paris.

She was arranging her cards for the first real move against Loris when Danton the detective found the trail. In a short time she saw that a man of nerve and acumen was pitted against her and the men who made up the secret League which she had formed.

Danton knew the nets and traps of New York by heart, and Loris could not have found a better man for the work he wanted done.

Cora's plan was this: She wanted every dollar possessed by the nabob banker, but she was not the person to rob him and afterward have herself exposed as the beautiful pest of Paris. No! she would force Loris to take her into his home as his wife, and then oblige him to marry Floy to the man of her (Cora's) choice! Was there ever concocted a cooler and more diabolical scheme than this?

Cora was equal to the occasion, and when our story opens she was waiting for the arrival of the City of Moscow which carried as passenger the man who was to work with her—the desperate and good-looking villain who had played so many deep games that he was not the person to turn from one in which millions were at stake.

The City of Moscow brought the man and he had slipped into the metropolis by a tug when Danton who had been warned to watch for him was getting ready to see him step upon the dock.

From the vessel to the tiger-tamer's house we have already followed the passenger with considerable care. We have seen him draw the fatal sphere at the conclave of the Hidden Hands presided over by Cora, we have kept track of him through the adventure which nearly cost him his life and left him at last still on the hunt for Nadir Bali.

During this time the Queen of the League occupied the luxurious parlor of her chosen home. Nobody suspected her of anything deep and dark, and if her neighbors could have seen her while her confederate was facing the glaring eyes on the showman's stair they would not have dreamed that she was waiting for a report of the death of two men.

Cora did not know into whose hands the fatal balls had fallen, but the absence of the man who

had arrived by the steamer must have told her something.

She saw the hands of the clock in the room creeping toward that hour when one would cover the other. More than one passing footstep caused her to listen for a moment. She was expecting the report of the chosen slayers.

"It was to have been done at once!" suddenly exclaimed Cora. "Can't they find the detective and the tiger-tamer? I could have found both long ago. The man who drew the ball for Nadir was told that the animals are caged and chained after a certain hour. I learned this and I cannot have been deceived. He who drew the other ball knows where Danton dwells. We all know that. Have the men turned cowards? We can't make the big play with Captain Nadir and the detective on the trail. Captain Nadir! You have turned to taming real beasts since you crossed the ocean. Was it your command over madmen that gave you such power over the kings of the jungle? I know you, Captain Nadir. I shall brush you from my path and go straight to success, and when I have the millions of Lloyd Loris under my hand I shall shine out as the Queen of Mammon, and no more wear my mask in the chamber of the League. You have come between me, captain. Before I am done with you you will wish you had never left your tigers."

The clock ticked on and Cora's glances toward it grew more frequent.

The silvery chimes struck twelve and she shut the book she had held open for an hour without turning a single leaf.

"This is torture!" she exclaimed. "I could have done it myself. Where are the cowards anyhow? Iris?"

She sent forth the name in a voice of command and almost before it had ceased to sound a footstep pattered down the stairway and came into the room.

Iris was a child of fourteen with a dark skin and bright black eyes. Her features bore a remarkable resemblance to Cora's.

"Iris, child," said the adventuress looking down at the girl who had been dozing up-stairs. "I'm going out."

Instinctively Iris looked up at the clock and marked the time with unconcealed wonder.

"I know what you think, child," smiled Cora catching the look. "I oughtn't go out at this hour. Well, never mind that, I always come back, don't I?"

"Always," answered little Iris.

"I'll come back this time," was the reply.

The girl who knew her duties when Cora was out made no answer but watched her depart with eyes that seemed to regard her with a most singular interest.

"I can't be shut up with the fatal balls in the hands of two men who should have reported ere this," said Cora to herself. "I can solve the silence in a little while. To-morrow ought to be our day. I am ready to cross the threshold of Lloyd Loris's house—to say to him, 'Marry the woman whose smile you fought for in Paris, or see the child you love die at your feet disgraced!' He will not refuse. By heaven! he dare not. I hold him and his millions at my mercy. Let him try to beat me at this desperate game! The Hidden Hands know more than one pathway to a man's heart!"

Cora was soon in a part of the city which was not like that in which she made her home.

The streets were deserted, for the night had passed the meridian hour, and the woman's footsteps sent out a ghostly sound.

Suddenly Cora paused at a corner and looked up at a building across the street.

An open hallway led into the lower part, but she seemed to study one of the windows of the second story.

"I would like to know whether he is dead up there?" muttered Cora's lips.

"The room is dark, when I believe he keeps a jet burning all night. It is a wonder that Gaspard did not break a limb when he jumped from the window. Why didn't he feel in the dark for the detective? Gods! what a chance that was. But he probably feared the velvet hands of the Shadow Sharp, and they would have choked him if he had run afoul of them."

She studied the dark window a few moments longer and then crossed the street.

Curiosity was uppermost in Cora's bosom. Her eyes gleamed with excitement.

At the mouth of the hallway she looked about her and then darted inside. Once beyond the step she took something from her bosom and crept up-stairs.

"I don't want to have to do it myself," came through her teeth. "But the nabob's detective is too hot on the trail. He must step aside."

Cora went up to the landing and to the first door on the left.

She put her ear at the keyhole and listened.

"It seems like death in there," thought she, but the next moment she drew back and hugged the wall for the knob had turned.

The Queen of the Hidden Hands held her breath while she waited.

In another moment the door opened and Cora saw the figure of a man.

"Why not?" thought she. "I am here and he is at my mercy!" And the next instant her

hand went up, to pause for a second above her head and then to drive a knife into the breast before her!

CHAPTER IX.

THE WRONG MAN.

CORA of the Hidden Hands struck on the mad impulse of the moment, and when she saw her victim fall back with a half-smothered cry she regretted her hastiness.

The falling man disappeared in the detective's room and Cora heard a heavy body strike the floor with a suggestive thud.

She turned away and flitted down the stairway to the street. Once there and entirely unobserved as she thought, for she saw no one, she glided away going back over the route by which she had come to the place.

If she had not met with the adventure just concluded she would have gone to Nadir Bali's house in search of information in that direction, but events admonished her to go home as speedily as possible.

She found Iris, the dark-faced girl, asleep in the parlor, and for several moments she studied the calm sweet face with a smile of envy at her lips.

"Has any one been here, child?" asked Cora when she had roused the guard who looked frightened.

"No one," answered Iris.

The eyes of the girl followed Cora wherever she went with singular curiosity.

"What is it, Iris?" suddenly queried the Queen of the League intercepting one of these looks. "You see me often enough not to look at me as you do."

"But you don't look like yourself, indeed you don't," replied Iris falling back.

"Ha! don't I?" laughed Cora, and then she swept to the mirror and surveyed herself for a moment.

In an instant she turned deathly pale for across her cheek lay a darkish stain the prints of three fingers with which she had touched her face during the journey home.

"I have bled at the hand a trifle, but I did not know I had left traces of it on my face," said she turning to the girl. "Go to bed, Iris. I will follow in a little while."

The girl came forward and Cora encircling her waist for a moment drew her quickly toward her, kissed her white forehead, and then dismissed her for the night.

But, her look followed Iris as long as she was in sight, and when she had passed up the steps Cora clinched her hands and breathed hard for several seconds.

"After all I had to do it myself. Oh, the cowards!" she exclaimed. "But it was well done and they can't track me. He can't, at least. I can do nothing now but wait for a report of the discovery. What will the police do? Where will the city ferrets look for the trail of the person who reduced their ranks by one? I fancy that I did my work best, though the cowards forced me to it. It was lucky that I took the dagger with me. In another second I would have been seen and then—Heavens! there is no telling what would have followed!"

The new morning broke calm and beautiful over the city between the two great rivers.

New York was astir with her usual promptness, and before the sun had fairly gilded the tall steeples, the newsboys were crying their wares on the street.

Cora, with eagerness and anxiety impressed on every lineament, sent Iris on a hasty errand to the nearest news stall two blocks away.

When the girl returned with two papers, she dismissed her to another part of the house, while she prepared to see whether or not her adventure had come to the notice of the enterprising reporter.

For some time she scanned the proper pages, but all at once her eyes rested on a certain paragraph, and then she read as follows:

A MYSTERIOUS CRIME.

"This morning at half-past one, Patrolman Rumford found the body of a man lying in the gutter, on his beat. Thinking that he had been overcome by numerous potations, the patrolman stooped to raise him, when he made the horrible discovery that the man had been stabbed in the left breast. A pool of blood had formed in the gutter, and a red trail extended for some distance on the pavement."

"As there were signs of life in the unknown, he was taken to the Accident Hospital, where his wound was at once pronounced fatal. The stranger's clothes afforded no clew to his identity, and his name, and the manner of receiving the wound, are unknown to the police. It can not be possible that the man was struck on the sidewalk, for Patrolman Rumford's watchfulness is proverbial, and he was not absent from the spot more than five minutes at a time. Our reporter, who visited the scene, traced blood-stains to the open hallway leading up into the building occupied by several independent detectives and other people, but did not pursue his investigations into the block itself."

"At last accounts, the wounded man was alive, but still unconscious. He is rather good-looking, has a well-trimmed, sandy mustache, hazel eyes, wears a brown suit, and carried, when found, a murderous-looking dirk and silver-mounted derringer."

Cora went to the end of the paragraph without catching her breath. She seemed to realize that she had committed a terrible blunder, that

she had struck with too much haste, and that, instead of ridding her path of the Shadow Sharp, she had probably killed a member of the League!

She could imagine that the man had been lying in wait for Danton the Detective—that he had grown tired of his vigil—that he had resolved to look elsewhere for the New York Vidocq—and that, when he was quitting the detective's office, she at first sight of him had driven the knife into his breast.

Cora's head seemed in a whirl for a few moments. A thousand wild fancies chased one another through her brain. What if the man at the hospital should recover consciousness before he died and say that a woman had finished him? What if he had recognized her in the light of the gas-jet in the corridor?

But then, she recalled the oath of the men of the secret League. They had sworn to betray no member of the dread organization; but when death is at one's door he forgets promises, oaths, everything.

Cora weighed all these things in the balances of an excited mind. At one time she thought of going to the hospital and look at the victim of somebody's dagger—in all probability her own.

If Danton could track the bloodstains on the sidewalk to his room would he not divine that some one had made a mistake—killed the wrong man as it were?

He knew that the Hidden Hands as a brotherhood were pitted against him. He was aware that, as Lloyd Loris's detective, he was a marked man, marked perhaps in secret conclave for destruction.

"My God! why didn't I withhold my hand?" exclaimed Cora throwing down the paper. "If I had looked the second time—there was light enough in the hall—I might have seen that the man who came out was not the Shadower. Now a great deal depends on the patient at the hospital. If death would befriend me, now is the time. Seal his lips and send him across the river. Render futile the skill of the surgeons. They are my enemies, and their science fights me whenever they apply it to the man under their care."

"What is that, Cora?"

The Queen of the League turned toward the door that opened into the hall and fell back from the man who stood there with a provoking smile on his lips.

"When did you come? Did you ring? No! you could not or I would have heard you. Never mind, though; you heard me."

"I could not help it. Something excites you. The unexpected has happened."

"The unexpected! Yes," and Cora snatched up the paper and thrust it into the man's hands.

"I saw that," said he, looking up into her face when he had given the startling paragraph a glance.

"What does it tell you?" questioned Cora.

"The chosen man failed."

"Because he found the detective ready for him?"

"Yes."

"That is your opinion, is it?"

"It is."

The woman laughed and closed the door after a quick but careful survey of the hall.

"There should be no secrets between us," she resumed, coming back to him and lowering her voice. "I am responsible for the dying man in the hospital."

"I don't understand."

"Well, I gave him the wound he has."

Cora's visitor who would have been very handsome but for his heavy eyebrows and a very livid though small crescent-shaped scar under his left eye, eyed her silently for a second.

"You could not wait for the reports?" said he, rather reprovingly.

"No. I went out to see what had been done, but with no intention of doing anything myself. The man came out of the fox's office, I thought it was the fox himself. My blood leaped like the current of fire through my heart. I drew the knife and gave him the whole blade. Of course the next minute I would have recalled it if I could. I would have taken it back, but, heavens! I could not. Now, if the patient dies with sealed lips—"

"Don't let that trouble you," interrupted the man. "He went across the river as silent as when the policeman found him."

Cora gave vent to an exclamation of thanksgiving.

"The chosen man probably grew tired of waiting for his victim, so did the holder of the other ball," the visitor went on.

"What! Did he fail also?" Cora cried.

"Fail? What else could he do with three loose tigers in the house waiting to tear him to pieces?"

"Loose?" echoed Cora, losing color. "I thought—"

"That they were chained, eh?"

"Yes."

"They were free, and if the man of the League had not retreated, they would have feasted on his blood."

"Ah!" she answered, laying her hand on his

arm. "I need not ask you who drew ballot number one. I know."

"Of course you do," was the response. "There shall be no secrets between us. I would have done my duty if the rascal's pets had been caged. I would have waited for his coming, for I was in the house armed for him. I afterward sought him elsewhere but missed him. We must try again, Cora."

"Yes, we must clear the path to the banker's millions. The League is one man short, but we will win without filling his place."

"Win? If but you and I remained, Cora, success would come all the same!"

"Better than that!" cried the Queen of the League. "I can go to final victory alone!"

CHAPTER X.

AN EMPTY CELL.

SAMSON SPARKS, as we may call Cora's visitor from now on without any further attempts to conceal his identity, looked wonderingly at the woman who had spoken the resolute words he had just heard.

"I don't want to go back to Nadir's den," said he, with a smile and a shrug of his shoulders. "I don't mean by this, Cora, that I have given up the duty imposed upon me by the prize I drew from the death-box at the meeting of the League. No! The tiger-tamer has escaped for a few hours—that is all. I shall find him elsewhere. If the beasts had been chained last night, as I thought they were, they would have a dead master to-day."

"They must have one such soon," said Cora "Captain Nadir knows too much. He has been more than a tiger-tamer in his time."

"I know him."

"He once lived in Paris?"

"Yes."

"He was overseer of a ward in St. Lazare, the female prison."

Samson Sparks showed his teeth in a grin.

"How retentive your memory is!" he laughed while the Queen of the League colored a little. "Yes, Nadir was overseer there. He was there when—"

"You need not go on," interrupted Cora lifting her finger.

"Because walls may have ears, eh?" was the rejoinder.

"No, but because Iris has," and the woman's voice sunk to a whisper. "I cannot forget that this man with the tigers was once attached to one of the most infamous prisons in the world. He has a memory, too, Samson—I can call you by this name here though I believe you are not to be known by it in the game we are playing. You are—"

"Duke Dillon," finished the man with a bow. "I am Mr. Dillon to our adversaries all the time unless we are compelled to show our true colors."

"You are right. My opinion is that we will have to do that before we bring Lloyd Loris to the trough. He idolizes his daughter. He has lived, schemed and worked for her. He has piled up fortune after fortune—stinting himself and courting sleepless nights in order to make her the richest heiress in New York. We must break him to harness. We must get between him and his child and get the Loris ducats. I have played deep before, but never in a game like this."

"You are entitled to win."

"I shall win. Now, about the man dead in the hospital."

"What about him?"

"Is he still unrecognized?"

"He was up to the time he died."

"You say that he did not speak after being found in the gutter?"

"I was so informed. But how did he reach the sidewalk?"

"I don't know unless he staggered from the detective's room after the blow and fell into the gutter in an attempt to cross the street."

"That seems plausible. Men rouse themselves desperately after receiving death wounds. He did not want to be found in the rooms armed as he was and so attempted to get away—made a supreme effort in that direction to fail."

"Do you think Dan Danton has visited the hospital?" suddenly asked Cora.

"I don't know."

"He may suspect—especially if his room shows signs of the chosen man's visit."

"That is true. Cora, I am going to see how the land looks. You have raised an important thought. Does the Shadow Sharp suspicion?"

"When will you come back?"

"Before noon."

"Keep in the background. As yet you are not known to be in the game. The person whom you visited last night did not recognize you."

"Nelly Pollen?"

"The convict's child."

"She did not. Her father would drift into our hands, if prison locks did not keep him back. I wished for him last night. By Jove! a word from me would have sent him to the tigers, and my life would not have been risked. The girl is deuced pretty."

"How old is she?"

"A few months past sixteen."

"Is she as pretty as Iris?" asked Cora.

"Yes, after her style. Nelly is fair-skinned, Iris is dark."

"Like her mother?"

"Like her mother."

Cora looked away and seemed to study the rich tapestry at the front windows for a moment.

"Where is Nelly Pollen's mother?" she suddenly asked.

"She is dead."

"Was she crooked—like her husband?"

"No. She was not the proper person to be a criminal's wife."

"Did she die before he went up for a term?"

"She left him and the world when Nelly was quite young. The girl barely recollects her."

"It is a pity," said Cora. "Nelly ought to be removed from her father's care. How does she live?"

"She is a news-girl."

"Everywhere?"

"Really, I did not ask her. I found her in the old house, very comfortable and contented, barring her father's absence. I was glad she did not know me."

"Samson Sparks, I hope your life has not crushed your finer sensibilities, as mine has mine," said Cora, looking him squarely in the face. "You ought to do something for Nelly Pollen. She is not to blame for her father's crime. It would be a blessing if death were to throttle Paul Pollen before the law sets him free. You certainly can't forget who Nelly's mother was."

"There!" exclaimed Samson Sparks. "If you go on in this manner I won't be able to gather any information to-day. We'll talk about Nelly Pollen and her future at another time. Will you be here at noon?"

"Say at two this afternoon."

"At two then."

A minute afterward the Queen of the Hidden Hands was alone. Samson Sparks on the street was hurrying away.

He walked rapidly until he found himself in the narrow part of New York where turning suddenly into a cramped street that zigzagged toward one of the rivers he bolted into a small frame shop and walking the whole length of it opened a door and stepped into a very small room.

His entrance disturbed an old man who was polishing with a chamois-skin and some lead-colored dust the case of a watch. At sight of Samson, the polisher, who had a thievish countenance despite his age fell back in his chair and stared for a moment with open mouth and eyes dilated with wonder.

"No questions just now if you please, Anak," said Sparks thereby cutting short a crop of interrogatives. "I've come back to the old haunts, as you see. I may have been in the city all the time or I may have visited the moon. It's all one just now where I've been. I'm not here to spin any yarns for your benefit, but to ask you what's the news?"

By this time the staring old sinner had found his tongue and he leaned forward with two sparkling eyes in his head.

"He's give 'em the slip!" he grinned throwing a look around the shop.

"Who has?" asked Sparks.

"What! don't you know?" exclaimed old Anak in evident astonishment. "Nol to be sure you haven't been back long. I knew they wouldn't keep 'im the full term."

A sudden light seemed to break in upon Sparks's mind.

"Where is he?" he asked as if he understood.

"Nearer than you think," was the reply.

"Would you like to see him?"

"I'd like nothing better."

Old Anak left his chair and thrusting his head into the long dark storeroom Samson had traversed to the private den called out: "Don't go to sleep, Dido," then shut the door, bolted it and turned to his visitor.

"You didn't see Dido when you came in, hey?" he laughed. "She's the same as ever, knows everybody that's ever been here twice. By Jove! I often think what a Cerberus she'd make for Old Nick if she only had another head. Of course she saw you when you came in, but it wasn't her duty to say anything, and she didn't."

During this chatter Anak was lifting a trap-door in the floor directly beneath his chair.

When it had been raised, a flight of steps was revealed, and the two men went down, Samson Sparks first, so as to let the old man shut the door as he liked.

The cellar beneath the trap was as dark as a dungeon, but the skeleton-like fingers of Anak's hand encircled Samson's wrist, and led him forward.

Presently something clicked like a bolt suddenly shov'd, and the visitor was pushed forward along a dark passage barely wide enough for a man to move in without sidling along the wall.

"I've buried him from 'em! They wou't find him here!" chuckled old Anak at his back.

"He knew where to come, and he didn't lose any time after reaching the city. One more door and we are with him, my friend. Here it is."

The next second Samson Sparks had his eyes suddenly blinded by a light, but the shading of them with a hand soon removed the difficulty, and he saw a man standing near a wall.

"It's a friend—an old friend," said Anak, addressing this man whose eyes were fastened on Samson.

The two men advanced toward each other at the same moment, and the serpent eyes of Anak saw them meet in the light.

"I always said they wouldn't keep me!" grated the man whose hand Samson took. "I'm a free bird once more—no, not quite free, for I've got to stay here till the trail cools. I've thought of you often since we parted. Mebbe if you had been here when they nabbed me they wouldn't have sent me up. Now, let those who made me wear stripes look out! They tell me that he has his tigers still. What do I care for tigers?"

Samson Sparks made no answer.

The very man he wanted had come back—escaped from Sing Sing—and his name was Paul Pollen.

CHAPTER XI.

DARK COMPACTS.

THERE was a fearful menace in every word breathed by the escaped convict, whose cropped hair and general appearance told of the life he had been leading.

Nelly's father had eyes that snapped fiercely while he talked about his prison life or mentioned the man whose testimony had sent him up the river.

He had a criminal's hatred for the tiger-tamer, and Samson Sparks was pleased to note that it did not abate as he went on.

"How is Nelly?" he suddenly asked, as if he had just thought of his child.

"She passes the shop occasionally, Dido says," answered old Anak.

"I'm going to make that girl the best of them all one of these days," exclaimed Pollen, turning to Sparks.

"The best what?"

"Queen of the light-fingers," was the response. "My mind hasn't been idle during my absence. Nelly is quick and pretty. You see, no one will suspect her. She's old enough to earn her own living anyhow, and she's got to do it."

"She makes it now by selling papers."

"She needn't give that up. One business will hide the other. Don't you see? By Jove! if she reads her papers, she will see that I'm out."

"She'll hear of it through the police," grinned Anak. "If you two gentlemen want to be alone a spell, I'll go back to my work."

Samson Sparks nodded to the old man, and in a moment he withdrew, leaving the two in the underground apartment.

The convict rested on a stool with his knee in his hands. He was large of face, and coarse-featured, and, with his cropped hair and short bristles, which in time would develop into a beard, looked desperate.

"When did you get here?" asked Sparks.

"Last night."

"You did not go near the old place?"

"No; I knew they would look for me there. I don't think a single cop in New York suspects that I ever knew Old Anak, and I remembered that the old fellow had a snug place like this. That's why I came here."

"I went down to the house last night."

"To Nelly's?"

"Yes."

"Did the girl know you?"

"She did not."

"It's rather strange, for she is quick to recognize faces, but then she never did get to see much of you."

"That is true."

A moment's silence followed Sparks's reply.

"What did you want with me last night?" queried the convict.

"I had a job for you."

"Won't it be kept open?" smiled Pollen.

"Not for long. It is urgent. I wanted you to go to the tiger-tamer's."

The escaped convict looked strangely at the man before him.

"I should have killed him if I had," he said, through his set teeth, at which Sparks fell back and laughed.

"That is just what I wanted done!" said he.

"When did the tiger king cross your path?"

"Since they sent you up."

"Well, not finding me, what did you do?"

"I went myself."

"To his house?"

"Yes."

"And finished him so that I won't get a chance to pay him back?"

"Not quite so bad as that," said Sparks, and then he proceeded to give the convict an account of his adventures with the tigers.

"I'm glad you failed," spoke Pollen, at the end of the narrative. "When I go on the same errand I'll leave the beasts masterless!"

"But when will you go on it?"

"To-night, if you say so," was the quick reply. "The police won't be looking for me on the street. They will watch the house and dog

Nelly's footsteps. As I say, they won't look for Paul Pollen in the open, with a knife in his hand, hunting for the man who sent him to prison."

"Did you ever say openly that you would kill Nadir?"

"Not in that many words. I told him after the trial that I would get even. He may recall my words when he learns that I have given Sing Sing the slip, but he won't be looking for me to-night."

"But the tigers—"

"To Tartarus with the pets of the arena. I shall not meet them on the stair. Besides, I need not find Captain Nadir at his house. The showman had several haunts six months ago, and I hardly think he's abandoned them. Old Anak has the best of disguises in his shop. I can deceive the best trail ferrets in the world with selections from the old rascal's outfit. Dido wields a ready brush, and a few strokes will make wrinkles where there are none now. Why, after passing through their hands, I would not be afraid to walk Mulberry street in broad daylight."

Samson Sparks felt his heart beat with pleasure at the convict's words.

"What is in this for you?" asked Pollen.

"In Nadir Bali's exit?"

"Yes."

"A good deal," was the answer.

"In money?"

"In money."

"I see. You are picking up a good hand—one that will contain some irresistible trumps."

"That is it exactly, Paul."

"I'm your man, but remember that I am going to pay the tiger-tamer for his evidence against me."

"I understand."

"Who takes the beasts when I'm through with their master?"

"I don't know who Nadir's heir is."

"Never mind. We won't bother with that."

Five minutes later Samson Sparks was once more in the sunlight of the streets of New York.

"The right man has come back in the nick of time," thought he. "I won't have to risk myself among the tigers any more, nor will I be compelled to carry out the orders of the death ballot. The compact is a fair one, and Paul Pollen won't shrink from carrying out his share of it. I must look after Nelly. He shan't transform that girl into a pickpocket and future prison-bird. I don't care how many pockets he picks nor how often he kills his man, but by heavens! I do care something for the future of his child! If the girl had a sensible friend or lover I could put him on the scent in a quiet way. She's got good blood in her veins, Nelly Pollen has, and he, her father, has already disgraced it enough."

Samson Sparks, with his promise to Cora in mind, set about to discover whether or not Dan Danton the Shadow Sharp knew anything of the crime committed in his room.

In a short time he found himself in the vicinity of the detective's quarters. He walked over the same ground across which Cora's victim had probably staggered to his bed in the gutter.

There were about the scene no signs that a terrible tragedy had taken place there. The sidewalk presented a scene of bustling activity and Samson noticed that no one stopped for a moment to survey the tragic spot.

Once or twice he looked into the open hallway and glanced at the detective's windows.

If he had looked a little closer in another direction he would have seen that he was observed by two eyes.

Danton had already singled out the man with the crescent scar who had escaped him by coming to the city on a tug, and Samson Sparks, in looking up at the detective's windows for him, was not looking in the right direction.

When Sparks moved off it was to cross the street at the first corner. Coming up on the other side to a point almost directly opposite the Shadow's room, he entered an eating-house and took a seat just inside the door, and at a table from which he could still see the hallway and the window.

By and by a man came down the steps and bolted across the street. He did not stop until he was in the restaurant.

As Samson's table promised plenty of room—he being the only person at it—the stranger, who looked like an attorney, took the chair opposite and ordered dinner like a man in a hurry.

"It was the queerest thing that ever took place in the block," said the man, looking at Samson.

"I don't quite understand," answered the Man of the League.

"No, perhaps not; but you saw the papers?"

"Yes, but—"

"Glanced over them merely, perhaps."

"Hardly that."

"Well, they found a dying man in the gutter across yonder," the man went on, nodding toward the open door. "He was lying on his face with a knife-stab in the left breast, fatal, of course. He's died since without making a sign, but that only deepens the mystery."

"I would think so," observed Samson in a manner calculated to draw the lawyer out.

"Early this morning you could see drops of blood on the steps going up into the block," he proceeded.

"Do they think the affair took place indoors?"

"I do. I don't know what Danton thinks."

"Danton?" echoed the Man of the League.

"Danton, the detective. He occupies the first door to the left at the top of the steps."

"Isn't he going to work up the case?"

"I think not, but, really, I can't say. These detectives don't go into a mystery nowadays unless there's a reward at the bottom. The man killed last night is unknown, nothing whatever on his person to lead to his identity. Must have been a prowler, or was followed by some one. I say he was killed indoors. Blood on the steps, a dead man in the gutter. Significant, eh?"

With this Samson's fellow-diner began on the dinner which had been brought, and the member of the League looked at him for a moment in silence.

"It is very strange," said he.

"The murder?"

"Yes."

"Very," answered the stranger. "My name's Benson. I practice in the lower courts. If the blood-marks had come to my door I would put somebody on the trail. Danton is good—none better, but he don't seem to take much stock in this affair. Don't let me detain you over your dinner. I'm glad to have met you. It was done inside; that's my opinion—I don't care what the rest say. Good-day, sir."

In less than ten minutes Benson the lawyer had bolted his dinner and was gone.

Samson Sparks saw him shoot across the street and disappear up the stairs, then he pushed his own chair back and left the table.

If he could have followed his new acquaintance he would have seen him enter the first room to the left.

"Well! It didn't take you long!" exclaimed a keen-looking man, who seemed to have been waiting for him.

"No," answered Benson. "I guess he's the fellow you're looking for. He appeared anxious to know how things were drifting—what your opinion is, and so forth."

"Has he heavy eyebrows?"

"He has."

"And a red crescent beneath his left eye?"

"Yes."

"Many thanks, Benson. I think I shall pick up a link before long. The man you interviewed did not learn discretion abroad. He is too eager by half. Did you tell him about the blood-stains?"

"I did."

"But said nothing about what I thought of the crime?"

"Nothing."

Again the Shadow Sharp bowed his thanks for Benson's services, and before five minutes had elapsed he was on the street, keeping in sight a man who had just paid his score at the restaurant's counter, and was now walking leisurely away.

CHAPTER XII.

DIDO AND HER BRUSH.

DICK CLAYTON, the young reporter, conveyed in a whisper early that same afternoon to Nelly, tidings of her father's escape from Sing Sing.

He encountered the girl on the street plying her old occupation, but she had not taken the trouble to look at the contents of the papers she sold, and as the police would be likely to shadow her, he broke the news as quietly as possible.

"Don't let on that you know anything about the escape," said Dick. "Your father is shrewd enough to keep away from home."

"But he won't forget the tiger-tamer!" was the girl's first expressed thought. "There will be murder if the two meet, for father blames Captain Nadir for his misfortunes. I don't hate the showman as I did. I believe he testified against father from duty, and not because he wanted to see him sent up. The man who came to our house and asked for father, is the person who went in among the tigers on murder bent. Nadir knows him, and they must fight it out together. I don't want father taken back to Sing Sing, but, sooner than see him stain his hands with the blood of the man he hates, I would see him captured."

"He will have the whole pack after him," replied the reporter. "It is true that his crime was not a great one, but several prisoners have escaped of late, and the authorities will exert themselves to return your father."

Nelly promised to be discreet, and saw Dick disappear.

Before long she knew that the police were on the watch. They regarded her with more than passing interest; she was followed some distance by a man in citizen's clothes whom, from her knowledge of city life, she took to be a detective.

She wondered if the tiger-tamer knew of the convict's escape. If he knew, was he on his guard?

The vengeance of the convict was apt to be

more successful than the visit of the man with the crescent scar. Paul Pollen had registered an oath that he would "get even" with the tiger king for sending him "over the road," and while the hounds were hunting for the escaped fox, he might accomplish his work and return to his covert.

Nelly knew nothing from actual experience of the interior of old Anak's den. She had passed it many times, always finding an ill-looking fat woman in the window with a pair of Cerberus eyes watching the constant flow of humanity. This was Dido, Anak's partner, and a creature as cunning and full of evil as the old shopkeeper himself.

The girl's mind was a nest of conflicting thoughts from the moment when she first learned of the convict's escape.

She would have gone home immediately after Dick's departure if she had not discovered that she was already watched. She did not want to drag the spy at her heels for she feared that, despite Dick's opinion, her father might have sneaked home, and a visit by the police would unearth him.

The girl did not exert herself to get rid of her papers. By snatches she read an account of the escape to which was added a description of the convict with a statement that he was doubtless in hiding somewhere in New York.

The reporter thought that Paul Pollen's return was only a question of time. A criminal so well known and of his prominence could not fool the hounds long; he was sure to be recaptured.

It was getting dusk when finding her for the time unobserved Nelly slipped into a narrow side street and started for home. Her object was to slip quietly into the house before the lamps were lighted and this she succeeded in doing.

"They have been here!" exclaimed the girl, a flush of indignation mantling her temples. "They have searched the premises from cellar to garret, but, thank Heaven! they did not find him. If I had been here— Ah! what could I have done? They would have gone on just the same. I'm glad I wasn't home."

As Nelly went through the house she encountered abundant evidence of the search for her convict father. The building had been ransacked from attic to cellar, but in a manner not to excite suspicion in the mind of one less observing than the girl.

"They won't come again, that's one consolation," breathed Nelly. "They know he isn't here, and I shall have rest. If I knew where he was and could reach him without being seen—"

She was interrupted by a knock which drove color from her cheek, and she looked toward the door undetermined until it was repeated.

"More bunters!" she thought moving forward. "I was wrong—I am not to have any peace. This is what I get for being a convict's daughter."

Expecting to find a detective or a uniformed policeman on the step, Nelly Pollen opened the door to greet Nadir Bali, the tiger-tamer.

Her surprise was very great and for a second she showed it by staring into the showman's face.

"I'm not one of his persecutors," said Nadir, coming in.

"Then you know that he has given them the slip?"

There was a tinge of triumph in Nell's voice for she had never believed that her father's punishment was just.

"Everybody knows that," answered the tiger-tamer. "The entire pack is out, unleashed as it were. Nobody thinks of the mysterious crime which deprived a poor devil of his life, but the prison authorities, and the police are bending their energies to recapture your father. I hope they won't find him."

The convict's daughter seemed to fall back and stare again at the man.

"A thousand thanks for those words!" she suddenly exclaimed, darting forward and taking Captain Nadir's hands. "You say that, recollecting what he said ere he went away?"

"Yes. He was mad, then. Why, they said he fairly frothed at the mouth. If I had been within reach, I presume he would have leaped at me like a tiger-cat; but I don't bear him any ill-will for that. He won't be apt to trouble me while they are hunting him. The man in my house last night might have given me trouble if the cats had not frightened him off."

"Won't be try again?"

"Not in the house at least," answered Nadir, with a smile. "He came with a good deal of courage, but the tigress sent him off the veriest coward in New York. Your friend Dick has said nothing about it in the paper. If the man with the scar—my old friend, Samson Sparks—looks for the merest mention of a burglar in my house he will look in vain."

"Is his name Samson Sparks?" asked Nelly. "You did not mention it last night."

"His name is Sparks, but for the present he sails under other colors."

"My mother's name was Sparks!" cried the girl. "By the merest accident I found her marriage certificate the other day. 'Paul Pollen to Margaret Sparks' is the way it read."

"May I see it, Nelly?"

The convict's child left the tiger-tamer for a

moment. When she returned she placed a folded paper in his hands.

Nadir walked over to the little lamp and opened the document.

It was dated nearly nineteen years before and showed that on a certain day by a certain clergyman of New York Margaret Sparks was married to Paul Pollen the hunted convict.

Nelly's bright eyes watched the tiger-tamer closely while he read the certificate from top to bottom.

He seemed to make a mental note of the minister's name.

"You are right," said he, folding the paper and handing it back to Nelly. "Your dead mother's maiden name was Sparks."

"Do you think she was of kin to the man whose name you have mentioned?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I hardly know, but can it be that all the blood in my veins is tainted? My father is a convict; that blackens me in the eyes of the world. My mother of whom I have not the slightest recollection bore at the time of her marriage the name of the man who last night went to your house to take your life. Captain Nadir, if you possess any secrets concerning my mother, keep them. I don't want to rob you of a single one."

"My child, your mother was one of the best of women. If she had lived the police would not be looking for Paul Pollen to-night; I repeat that I hope they won't catch him. If I can shield him I shall do so. I don't mind what he said when they sentenced him. I would invite him to my house for safety if I could find him. You know they would never think of looking for him where my tigers are."

Nelly Pollen could only press the hands of the swarthy man and look her gratitude.

What would she have said if she could have entered a certain underground apartment at that moment and seen a woman deftly transforming the face of a man of forty into that of a person of sixty?

The lamp that burned on the table threw a poor light upon the scene and put the shadows of the artist and her subject dimly yet full of grotesqueness on the wall.

When the last wrinkle had been finished the female transformer leaned back with a broad grin of satisfaction. The man picked up a hand looking-glass and surveyed himself for a few moments.

"Dido, you are superb!" exclaimed he.

The fat woman laughed until her eyes could not be seen.

"I wouldn't be afraid to interview Inspector Byrnes with this venerable phiz!" he went on. "But then I won't do it, Dido—not to-night at any rate. I have other fish to fry, and one in particular. A man may forget some things, but he never forgets who sends him to a felon's cell and prison fare. I could forget my daughter first."

After awhile a little old man, with a face of parchment and the eyes of a serpent, came from the darkness beyond the wall, and pronounced the work of Dido's brush all that could be desired. Then the woman went away, and the transformed individual changed his clothes, after which he intimated his readiness to be off.

If Nelly Pollen could have witnessed these proceedings—if she could have seen the dangerous-looking knife which one of the men put in his pocket, though he said with a grin as he did so, that he knew a better way without shedding blood—if she could have seen all this, we say, would she not have trembled for the tiger-tamer's life?

But she knew nothing of these events, and as Nadir bade her good-night, Paul Pollen the convict slipped from old Anak's shop so well disguised—thanks to Dido—that he begged a match of a well-known detective, and went his way unrecognized, chuckling to himself, as he brushed those on the lookout for him.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CONVICT'S HUNT.

NOBODY suspected that the well-disguised man flitting under the street lamps was Paul Pollen, the escaped convict. If he had been suspicioned there would have been manacles for him on every corner, and he would have had a dozen human hounds at his heels.

He was not long quitting the vicinity of Anak's quarters.

The old shop, which purported to be a second-hand store, when, in reality, it was a secret receptacle for stolen goods, was soon left far behind.

Goaded first by a desire that was natural, Paul slipped down to the mouth of the alley where Nelly lived. He felt secure in his disguise, and then he thought he might be able to catch a glimpse of the child he had not seen for six months.

He went no further than the opening of the alley. He saw the outlines of his house, but Nelly did not make her appearance.

As he was about to move on, a woman glided into the dark thoroughfare. She almost touched him as she left the sidewalk, and her action was enough to claim the convict's attention.

Why did he stare at her until he saw her

mount the wooden steps in front of his house? What business had she there?

Kept on the spot by the figure on his doorstep, Paul Pollen did not move on until he saw it disappear beyond the threshold.

"What does she want in my house, and who is she?" the convict asked himself. "What new acquaintances has Nelly made during my absence? That woman isn't the girl herself. No, no! She hasn't grown like that. By Jupiter! I'm going to look into this affair, even if they nab me for it."

He dodged into the alley, and flitted through the shadows of the dingy-looking houses to his own. It was separated from its neighbor on the right by a narrow passage into which he squeezed his figure, and then sidled toward a window which commanded a view of the room in which Nelly would receive her visitor.

The window had closed shutters, but a missing slat afforded the convict all the view he wanted.

An exclamation of surprise almost betrayed his presence when he caught sight of his daughter.

Nelly had improved greatly in the six months. Her figure had filled out and increased considerably in stature, and her open-air occupation had given her health and added to her good looks.

Her visitor was rather tall and beautiful. She was no longer very young, though she had not passed middle-age. Her face indicated female cunning to the secreted convict who had studied human nature in prison and out, and the longer he looked at her the more he wondered what had brought her to his house.

Unfortunately he could not hear what passed between the woman and his daughter, but the interview did not seem to please the visitor. Nelly was determined about something, and at the close of her last words she was left alone.

Paul Pollen was the visitor's shadow by the time she got back to the sidewalk. He had resolved to track her home, which he did with the persistence of a bloodhound.

"Ho! a schemer in high life, eh?" exclaimed the convict, looking at the house which had received his quarry. "I'll know before daylight who lives there, and it won't take me much longer to find out what took her to my house."

Paul went back, but not without thinking of the woman he had shadowed—Cora, the Queen of the Hidden Hands.

Half an hour later he found the house of the tiger-tamer quiet and dark. It was the first time he had visited the place since his long sentence.

He stood off and glared at it as Nadir's tigers had glared at Samson Sparks on a former occasion. He seemed to hate everything about the premises, for while he looked he would growl forth his anger and clinch his hands until the nails almost cut into his palms.

"I know Nadir! He never comes home this early," muttered Paul. "Samson should have known something about the beasts before he entered. I don't intend to wait for the master among his slaves. I know where he used to spend his evenings when he had no show, and he is not exhibiting just now. I discovered Captain Nadir's resort a few days before he saw me lift the purse that sent me up. He does not know that I found him out, and I was not fool enough to give my secret away."

The convict left the house to the tigers, and disappeared once more. He kept among the quiet streets as long as possible, but when he was compelled to show himself on Broadway in the criticising glare of the electric lights, he did so without any fears.

Across Broadway and down one of the streets that debouch into it where the city narrows, Paul Pollen pursued his way.

Nobody knew that part of New York better than he. In twenty years of crooked life he had become acquainted with the whole metropolis, but more especially with the part which he was now entering.

No one but the convict would have looked for Nadir Bali, the tiger king, in that quarter at that hour. Always well dressed and sleek in speech and appearance, the tiger-tamer was supposed to hold himself aloof from that which was dark or doubtful. He was a prominent figure on the streets, and as thousands had seen him in the arena, he was known everywhere by sight.

The Sing Sing convict kept on as if he were trailing his victim by scent.

When he turned into a new street it was for a purpose—to shorten his journey. He no longer cared for the lights and the people whom he encountered. Dido had rendered his identity impenetrable with her wonderful brush.

At length the chase seemed to terminate. The jail-bird ran down a short flight of stone steps and pushed open a door in the center of which was a large pane of frosted glass.

In a moment Paul found himself in a large room well covered with round tables. There were four chairs at each, and nearly every one in the room was filled by men of all ages—from the young gentleman nearly of age to the heavy-headed beer-drinker and law-breaker.

The convict did not take a seat though one was offered him by the departure of a customer,

but passed to the end of the room and disappeared through another door.

"It's pretty full up there," said the voice of a waiter whom Paul encountered just as he placed his foot upon the first of a number of steps.

"It'll hold one more, eh?" laughed the convict.

"I guess it will."

Paul waited no longer but bounded up-stairs and turned down a long passage which led from the landing.

There were doors at short intervals on both sides, and a light beyond each transom told him that all the rooms were occupied.

"I heard 'im say once in a crowd that nineteen was his lucky number," murmured the convict. "He used to be found in room nineteen, and nowhere else. It is at the end of the hall on the left. Abi! here I am!"

Paul Pollen stopped in front of a door bearing the number 19 in black on a gray background. Where he stood the light of the nearest gas-jet did not fall, and the spot was a little relieved by a dim light beyond the transom overhead.

After a while the convict turned the knob and pushed open the door. He stopped suddenly on the step, and then, despite his resolution, drew back. Instead of finding half-a-dozen men in the room he had found but one, and that one Nadir Bali the tiger tamer!

The convict had found his prey, but unexpectedly had found him alone.

"Come in," said the voice of Captain Nadir, as Paul fell back at the unlooked-for discovery. "My friends have just left, swearing that they would play no more in Number 19, ha, ha! What do you think of numbers, my friend?"

Already the convict had recovered his composure and had shut the door.

He came forward and took the first chair he found.

A small card-box was on the table and Captain Nadir opened it with a suggestive smile and a look.

"Shall we try the mysteries of the pack?" he asked.

"I come here for amusement—not for gain. Always to number 19. Ha! I half-believe you know me. A great many do. I am Nadir Bali—the 'Man with the Tigers,' as the bills say."

By this time Paul Pollen had found the light a little too strong.

He was afraid it would show the dark-eyed tiger-tamer the artistic work of Dido's brush, and he wanted to quiet every nerve before he attacked the man who was said to be as strong as one of his ferocious pets.

"I know you," answered Paul. "Your tigers have made you famous. I've seen you in the arena."

"Where I've been a thousand times and more!" was the answering exclamation. "When did you see them last?"

Captain Nadir had taken the pack from the box and was running over the cards with the dexterity of a magician.

The convict seemed caught by the simple query, but for a moment only.

"I always see you when you are in the arena," he replied, thus happily finding his way out of the difficulty.

"A constant patron, eh?" smiled the polite Nadir. "I have many."

At that moment his eyes seemed to rest on Paul's forehead where the lifelike wrinkles were. The next instant they fell to his eyes in an eager study full of quick suspicion.

A thought passed through the convict's mind like a flash of lightning.

"He knows me!" he said inwardly to himself. "The one man I cannot deceive I have found. It is Nadir the tiger-tamer!"

"Don't let what I have discovered interfere with the game," said Captain Nadir, reaching across the table and touching the convict's hand before it could be withdrawn. "Your nerve will go a long way toward saving you. I did not expect you, but I won't betray you. Indeed, for the sake of your child, I'm anxious to hide you from the police. I can do it."

"I don't ask anything at your hands!" cried the convict, his eyes seeming to catch fire as he broke away. "I've been hunting you for hours. Didn't I say I'd pay you back one of these days? The time has come!"

Captain Nadir saw the figure of the jail-bird leap from his chair, and whip around the table before he could leave his seat.

He saw, too, the knife now tightly gripped by the hunted man, and heard the oath of vengeance as it ground its way out between the clinched teeth.

Quick as a flash the tiger-tamer threw up his arm, and then followed with an upward spring of his body.

The two men met at the rounding edge of the table, and the convict's fury carried him forward with an impetuosity that bore Nadir Bali to the wall beyond.

But there the nimble tiger king slipped from the hands of his foe, and Pollen felt the knife twisted from his grip, and then found himself crushed against the wall, with two silken but terrible hands at his throat, choking out his very life, for as they tightened the room grew dark, and his senses swam.

He had found his enemy sure enough!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SHADOW'S REVELATION.

WHEN the man from Sing Sing recovered sufficiently to note his surroundings, he found himself hemmed in by the walls of room No. 19.

He was the sole tenant of the place. Nadir Bali had departed, and left him alone.

Paul got upon his feet and felt his throat. He had been pretty well choked, and while he felt the spot where a good deal of soreness still remained, he was obliged to confess that the tiger-tamer overmatched him in strength and agility.

After awhile he went out and passed down to the sidewalk.

Some time had passed since his attack up on Nadir, and that individual was not to be seen!

"Better luck next time," muttered Paul. "He offered me asylum—among his tigers, I presume, but I'd sooner go back to prison of my own accord. When we meet again, Captain Nadir, it won't be on equal terms. No, the advantage will be with me, and I won't fail to make use of it. I will not get to carry out my promise to Samson—not to-night, at least, and I might as well go back to Anak's."

He made his way back to the little old shop disgruntled over his failure to rid the world of the man who had sent him to prison, but all the time breathing new hatred against him.

Now he looked to see whether or not any one was on his track. If Nadir had penetrated his disguise, why should not others do the same? Again he carried a knife along his sleeve, and at the slightest touch from behind he would have turned and shown fight.

Not long afterward he sat sullen and dejected in the underground apartment beneath Anak's shop.

His face was a study of disappointment and rage.

"I'll play tiger again, never fear, Captain Nadir!" growled he. "I'll out-tiger your most ferocious pet. You had the best of me to-night. You are as supple, as strong as Nepaul, your biggest beast; but a knife outwits strength and discounts cunning. Wait till I move again. Give me a little more time, Samson. The man you hadn't the courage to kill yourself will succumb to me in time."

At the same hour Danton the detective sat in the luxurious library of Lloyd Loris's house.

The banker's face looked more careworn than ever. In the past twenty-four hours ten years seemed to have been added to his life, and the eyes that watched the city Shadow were deeply sunken ones and restive.

"Tell me, what have you discovered?" he asked, eagerly.

"I've picked up a link or two."

"Concerning the League that is trying to wreck my life?"

"Yes."

Loris fell back and waited for the recital.

"You need not fear a repetition of the closing scenes of your last visit," continued the millionaire, catching the detective's glance as it went to the door. "Floy for the present is not at home."

"Not at home?" echoed Danton.

"Not here. I sent her to a relative's out of the city to regain her old self. Her swoon terribly unstrung her nerves. I am confident that she heard nothing compromising, but I think what a narrow escape the secret had. My God! it chills me to think of it. My child will soon recover where she is. She will have the society of Claude whom she will wed by and by. I have instructed the young man to call often. As I have told you, Claude knows nothing, but I half-believe he suspects. But never mind him. He is discreet."

Danton rather approved of Floy's removal for the present, though he was not sure that she had heard none of her father's confession. She could have heard his voice from the stair in the hallway, and the wild cry and the swoon told him—Danton—that something terrible to the beautiful girl must have been heard.

"I told you that the woman, Therese Talcott, over whom you and Samson Sparks fought in Paris, is still alive," said the detective.

"I have not forgotten," was the banker's answer. "The revelation has driven sleep from my eyes ever since."

The Shadow Sharp could well believe it.

"I have seen the woman since I was last here," he resumed.

"Seen Therese?"

"Yes."

"How does she look?"

"Of course twenty years and more have greatly changed her."

"Certainly."

"She is a magnificent-looking woman still."

"She was then," said the nabob, as if talking to himself.

"She is Queen of the Hidden Hands."

Lloyd Loris started and then smiled.

"I could have guessed as much. Ever since your last visit I have been thinking. I see a guiding hand in the plays that have been made against me—the hand of some enemy. What does she call herself now?"

"She is Cora Catlin."

"A woman with plenty of money?"

"With an unlimited supply, from the state she keeps up."

"She must have prospered since I killed her friend and lover."

The banker lowered his voice, and a smile finished the sentence.

"Are you sure you killed Samson Sparks?" quietly asked Danton.

Something—the detective's look or the sound of his voice—riveted Loris's gaze upon him in an inquisitive stare.

"Good heavens! didn't I run him through in the Bois de Boulogne?" he exclaimed. "He was gasping his last when I looked at him, and my second told me that he saw him buried in an obscure corner of the Cemetery des Capuchins. What! didn't I kill the man who insulted me? Do you mean to say—"

Loris broke his own sentence to stare the more closely at a bit of paper which the detective had taken from his pocket.

"Thanks to the latest improvements in photography," smiled Danton, "we can button our coats with a camera. I don't pretend to be a professional, but here is something for you to look at all the same."

The millionaire who had been looking at the folded paper with the utmost impatience now took a small photograph from the detective's hands and leaned toward the lamp.

It was a picture evidently taken on the street for it was flanked by shadow figures and faces, but the one in the foreground stood boldly out—the face of a man in middle life with a strong though handsome countenance despite the heavy eyebrow.

Danton, the Shadower, did not seem to pay very close attention while Loris studied the photograph, but at the same time he was eying the banker closely.

"Is this man supposed to be Samson Sparks?" asked Loris suddenly looking up.

"Do you think he can be?"

"I am not going to be surprised at anything," was the response. "If this is the man I supposed I had killed then Cora Catlin has an assistant in the plot against me."

"I am convinced that the passenger registered on the City of Moscow's list as Duke Dillon, is the person whose picture you hold. He frequents Cora's house and she is Therese Talcott. The two are working together. Duke Dillon barely reaches New York before the League strike a blow."

"What did it do?"

Danton reached across the table and selected an afternoon paper from among the several there. Running his eye over a page he marked a paragraph in one of the columns and handed the paper to Loris.

"Do you know who killed this unknown man?" asked the banker after reading a moment.

"A member of the League."

"But why should he be killed?"

"It was a mistake," answered Danton.

"How a mistake?"

"The man was killed in my office. He lay on my floor for—I don't know how long. Dying men do strange things sometimes. This one, finding death at his heartstrings, and not wanting to be discovered in my room, nerved himself to a degree sufficient to take him down to the street where they found him. My theory is this: He sought my room by the command of the League to get me out of the game. I did not oblige him by coming home in time. His absence rendered some one else impatient, that person went to inquire into the delay. It is no trick for a person to get from the street to my office as you know. The assassin gave up the watch, he came into the hall in the dim light and was struck by mistake by the person who could not wait."

"Gods! you reason a thing out in detail!" exclaimed Loris looking amazedly at the banker.

"I have a good many points that help me," smiled Danton. "The drops of blood tell me nearly how the whole thing happened."

"Have you told the mystified police?"

"No. This is a secret which for the present belongs to me. It was my life that was sought—sought by the secret League because I happened to be your man, Mr. Loris. The League killed one of its own last night. It was tiger rend tiger."

"But who struck the blow? That naturally follows, you know. Was it this man—the person supposed to be Samson Sparks?" and Loris looked at the picture again.

"No. Duke Dillon was employed at the time."

"Then—"

The haunted banker did not proceed.

"Let us stop here," said the detective. "The member of the League is dead and the knife that took his life has been carefully wiped and put away for the man it missed. Now, Mr. Loris, since Duke Dillon is Samson Sparks the man you did not kill in Paris, since he is here to help Therese Talcott and the League strip you of your wealth and blight the life of your child, I ask that you keep nothing from me."

Lloyd Loris looked hard at his detective and lost color. A moment later he left his chair and crossed the room to a secret side-board in the wall. Taking from it a bottle and two

glasses he came back to the table and poured out some wine whose shining beads danced merrily around the rims of the goblets.

"Go on," said he huskily as he emptied his glass.

Danton looked at him half in pity.

"Where did you marry Floy's mother?" he asked.

Louis started violently.

"In the north of England," he replied.

"In a small village called Petersham?"

"Yes. The parish records there—"

"There are no parish records," interrupted Danton.

"My God! why not?"

"They were stolen less than a month ago."

The pallor of the nabob's face was something terrible.

"Stolen?" he gasped. "Stolen? This crowning piece of infamy must be the work of the League!"

"It is," rejoined Danton. "The City of Moscow has just brought the thief to this country."

CHAPTER XV.

NADIR PICKS UP A LINK.

DID the Shadow Sharp suspect that the man whose blood stained the floor of his office had been shed by the beautiful Queen of the Hidden Hands?

The reader will recall the conversation between Samson Sparks and Benson, the so-called lawyer, in the restaurant across the street from the detective's rooms.

This had led the Man of the League to believe that Danton was not taking any interest in the affair, and such was the information he conveyed to Cora Catlin that afternoon.

After quitting the banker's presence the detective directed his course to that part of the city occupied by the tiger-tamer.

Had he discovered that it was Nadir Bali who had dropped into his office the letter telling him to watch the wharves for the City of Moscow's passenger, or had he gathered from the nabob certain information which he wanted to increase by a visit to the tiger's den?

Circumstances had so timed his visit that he reached the tiger king's house a few moments after Nadir's return from the building in which he had had his struggle with the escaped convict.

His ring was soon answered and he found two pair of eyes looking at him when the door opened—a tiger's and a man's.

In a moment the Shadow Sharp sat in Nadir's little parlor to which Samson Sparks had retreated when menaced by the beasts, and the two men for the first time in their lives found themselves so closely face to face.

"I have come from Lloyd Loris," began Danton looking into the tiger-tamer's swarthy face.

"I thought so," answered Nadir.

"He did not send me. I come of my own accord. Do you know that the records of the parish of Petersham in the north of England have lately been stolen?"

It was almost amusing to see the effect of this unexpected question.

The face of Captain Nadir suddenly changed color. It grew almost white. He looked in surprise at Danton a moment and then said as a smile seemed to chase the pallor away:

"Stolen, eh? And do you know, Captain Danton, that the thief is in New York?"

The detective nodded. "He has been to see me," continued Nadir, "but as he did not find me at home he did not remain long."

A smile accompanied the last words.

"You did not see the Moscow's passenger land?" continued the tiger-tamer.

"No."

"He slipped off in a tug and cleverly gave you the slip."

There Nadir stopped as if he had finished but Danton had not visited him to get nothing more than this.

"Loris tells me that you know something of his past," the detective went on.

"Does he? I do. Not a great deal, but enough."

"He has not been afraid of you."

"As he is of others?" laughed Nadir.

"As he is of others."

"Well, he need not be. I don't intend to blight two lives with my tongue. Others are trying it, now. I know just as much as they do; more!"

The man with the tigers relapsed into silence again, and Danton was forced to bite his lip with vexation. Could he not draw this mysterious man out?

"You know that the League of the Hidden Hands exists," he began anew.

"I know it."

"It has marked those who stand between its desires and success."

"It has marked Captain Nadir," smiled the Bengalese.

"Then we ought to be allies, for I am marked, and only a few hours ago escaped by a scratch."

"From the knife?"

"From the knife."

"My tigers probably saved me," laughed Nadir. "The Moscow's passenger came here to

carry out the commands of the League, and but for your door my cats would have torn him to pieces. Samson Sparks is a shrewd, cool and merciless rascal. I've known him for years—in two climes I might say. For all his coolness he is tinctured with cowardice and will get another to do the job if he can. In Paris a good many years ago he was a clever gambler and adventurer, and the not he started then is just now trying to catch the bird."

"You mean Lloyd Loris?" queried Danton, pleased with the progress the tiger-tamer was making.

"Yes. Samson Sparks was run completely through in the duel in the Bois du Boulogne, but, unfortunately for humanity, the sword did not pierce a vital part. There was a mock burial in the Cemetery des Capuchins. Loris's second was cleverly hoodwinked, and Samson recovered to plague his antagonist in his old age. Ever since he has had the run of Europe under a dozen names, and more than once he has been compelled to leave a country in the greatest haste. The game he has in hand now is the largest he ever undertook. Do you know what it means?"

Captain Nadir looked closely at the detective as he put the question.

"It means the financial ruin of Lloyd Loris," said Danton.

"More than that."

"It means the old man's disgrace in Floy's eyes."

"More than that."

"It means the blighting of the girl's life."

"Yes; but how?" cried the tiger-tamer, leaning toward his visitor, as his eyes burned eagerly, like fresh coals of fire.

"By estranging her from her lover."

"Ah! if that were the game!" exclaimed Nadir Bali. "The schemes of the conspirators are deeper than that. Do you suppose that a woman who knows every stone in the prison of Saint Lazare, and a man who wears between his shoulders the deeply-burned brand of a thief, mean no more than the mere wrecking of a young girl's life when their goal is a million dollars? You may be very shrewd, Daniel Danton. You are the best shadower in this great city, but you do not penetrate far enough. Your drill must go deeper than it has yet gone. Of these heads of the Mystic League one expects to gain a husband, the other a wife."

The New York detective leaned back in his chair and gazed amazedly at the man before him.

"That scheme is linked to the one for the Loris millions," resumed Nadir. "I thought I would startle you a little. In less than twenty-four hours after our removal the nabob would have the most audacious visitor that ever crossed his threshold."

"Therese?"

"Or Cora Catlin, as she calls herself now."

"It would be audacity."

"Certainly. She has played such a role before, and knows all its points. She would coolly tell Lloyd Loris that she desired him for her husband. She would show him that she knew his past, which she does; she would hold before him the specter of exposure, and threaten to strip his past before the thousands who hold him in esteem."

"He would resist."

"Do you think so?" smiled the tiger-tamer. "Do you believe that he would refuse to marry this cool adventuress and see her expose him to the young girl for whom he would give up his life at any time? You don't know the man you serve. This woman and her confederate would go further than this. You have said that the records of the parish church at Petersham are missing. It is believed that they held the only record of Loris's marriage to Floy's mother. Let the conspirators say that the girl is a waif—that no record of her mother's marriage exists. The League can say this, and laugh at their victim's reply."

Danton saw the terrible force of this argument. It stood out before him like a visible presence of evil, and his blood seemed to run cold as the tiger-tamer laid bare the diabolical plot.

"I know the pair," Nadir went on. "I saw one in prison and the other branded in the galleries. I know why they want me out of the road, and I can see why they don't want you where you are. A man was found dying in the gutter near your rooms."

"Yes."

"He belonged to the League. He drew one of the fatal ballots, but your absence kept him waiting too long for the patience of one of the pair."

"Do you think so?" asked Danton.

"Here," said the tiger-tamer, drawing from his bosom a small lace-edged handkerchief which emitted a subtle perfume. "A certain person who went up your stairs after the man had been taken to the hospital, found this in a dark corner near your door."

"There is no name on it—no initials," said the detective.

"Nothing of the kind," rejoined Nadir Bali. "It is merely a handkerchief, but a woman's."

"I think so."

"Twenty odd years ago a certain perfume

was in vogue in Paris," continued the tiger-tamer. "It went out of use almost that long ago. It was inhaled in the parks, on the boulevards—everywhere. Now, Detective Danton, if you will lift the handkerchief you will inhale the forgotten perfume which long ago caught the fashion of Paris. The woman who caused the duel between Loris and Sparks, the adventurer, has used the 'White Rose' ever since."

"I see," said Danton. "You mean that the Queen of the League killed by mistake the man in my room?"

The answer was a smile on the dark face of the tiger-tamer.

"Since the handkerchief gives her away in your eyes, let me say that I have not been idle since the murder at my door."

"Ah?"

"Not idle," repeated the Shadow Sharp. "I have found a trail—a trail which has led me to the very woman you suspect. Now, when she plays her hand against the nabob I may be there."

"Yes, if you do not fall before that time by the Hidden Hands of the League," was the answer of the tiger king.

CHAPTER XVI.

SAMSON SPARKS GETS A BACKSET.

THE underground chamber, sacred to the uses of the Hidden Hands, was in use again.

The masked queen on the raised platform at one end of the room sat erect in her throne-like chair, and the dominoed members of the conclave occupied their usual seats around the walls.

One chair was vacant, and every member had contemplated it in silence.

All did not know that the brother who was wont to occupy it had died in the accident ward of a city hospital from a knife-stab in the breast, that he had been found in a Broadway gutter unable to tell, even if he knew, which was doubtful, who had dealt the fatal blow.

The holders of the fatal ballots had failed to do their duty. More than twenty-four hours had passed and the two enemies of the League were still alive. Indeed one was on a trail which if successfully followed would bring the schemes of the Order to naught.

The voice of Cora quivered a mite when she reached this point.

She told the attentive brethren that the possession of a fortune for each hung upon the carrying out of the next ballot.

"There must be no failure," said Cora. "In order to provide against it we have adopted a new plan. The person who draws a command may select a brother. Two heads are sometimes better than one. They will proceed with caution against the enemy. Let the ballot be taken."

A man advanced and took the wooden box from the table. As he passed before the members of the League the balls were drawn out one by one until but one remained for himself.

Half an hour later the room was dark and the Hidden Hands were in the street.

"No prize this time," laughed Sampson Sparks as he appeared to Cora in her parlor a few minutes afterward. "I don't have to face the tigers again, nor track their master from pillar to post. I saw with some surprise that you took the risk?"

"Why not?" exclaimed the Queen of the League. "Haven't I interest enough in the outcome to assume some chances? You did not draw a prize, you say?"

"I did not."

"But I did."

Samson fell back and looked at her.

"Fate has pitted me against Nadir Bali, the man with the tigers," she went on. "I am to select an assistant if I choose to do so. Whoever is selected is to obey without a word."

The man in Cora's presence was seen to lose color.

"Do not fear; I shall not take you," added Cora, with a sarcastic smile. "I believe you were drawn once and failed."

"I did because—"

"Because the pets of the Bengalese were unchained, eh? Never mind. We won't discuss that. I have the ball which contained the warrant for Captain Nadir's death. There no secrets between us. The man with the tigers must look out now."

"When will you proceed against him?"

"At once."

"In the middle of the night?"

"Why not?"

"At this hour you are apt to find him at home and I need not tell you by whom he is guarded."

Cora's eyes flashed.

"I know something about his body-guard," said she with a fearless toss of the head. "I have seen Nepaul, Nero and Nina in the arena. But do not be so certain that I will find Nadir at home at this hour."

"He has other resorts, then?" queried Samson.

"He may have a dozen. I am going up to dress. Will you wait for me? It is not necessary, though."

Whether or not Samson Sparks took the last remark as a hint that Cora would prefer to see him no more that night, he said he would not re-

main longer as he had an engagement of some importance elsewhere, then took his departure, receiving the woman's good-night at the door coupled with an invitation to call as early as he wished the following day.

"By Jove! it won't do to let her lunge at Nadir Bali as she lunged at the Man of the League who came out of Dan Danton's rooms," muttered Samson as he walked from the house. "They tell me that the tiger tamer has all the characteristics of his pets. He used to handle the Amazons of Saint Lazare as he would handle a stubborn child. If Cora attacks him and fails the game is up; if a man not in the play does it that is another matter. What did my prison bird do last night? He promised to go out and find Captain Nadir. Did he do so? I will see."

It did not take Samson long to reach old Anak's den. Passing Dido at her post he continued through the junk-shop to Anak's private quarters where he found the old fellow altering a piece of stolen property so as to be able to put it on the market without fear of detection.

"Where is he?" whispered Samson.

"Not yonder," answered Anak, glancing at the floor.

"Is he out?"

"He is out."

A shadow of disappointment darkened the caller's face.

"You would not know him," grinned Anak. "Dido's brush is wonderful—wonderful! She paints on natural canvas, ha, ha!"

Samson became impatient.

"Did he go out last night?" he queried.

"He did."

"When did he come back?"

"After midnight. He passed a hundred policemen, all looking for him. Dido's brush again, you see."

"Hang Dido's brush!" mentally ejaculated Samson.

"He saw his child, too," continued Anak.

"Risked his head in the trap, did he?"

"It was no risk after Dido had finished him."

Samson bit his lip with vexation.

"Did he say he met with success last night, Anak?"

"I did not ask him, but he growled a good deal, like a dog does when a bone is taken from him."

"Then he failed."

The old junker watched Samson for several seconds.

"You want to find him, I see," he exclaimed.

"I do."

"Don't you think it might put the dogs on his track?"

"The police, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"I do not. I know how to be careful. If I knew how Dido had fixed him I could look for him with some assurance of finding him even on the streets of New York."

"Last night she made him twenty years older. To-night she sent him out a masterpiece of youth. That is, he doesn't look over thirty. She went into ecstasies over her work. A man in dark salt and pepper, a rather wide-brimmed hat, youngish in face, false beard, to suit his age, and one of Dido's best scars over the right eye; that is Paul as he walked out of the studio an hour ago."

Samson waited to hear no more, but went to the street. As he passed the fluffy woman in the corner near the door he received a smile which told him that Dido sometimes painted before a mirror and the next moment he was on the street.

"He may have gone back to Nelly, but if he is still after Captain Nadir he will let the girl go for the present. I want to keep him on the trail. Cora must not match herself against this shrewd athlete. If the jail-bird finishes him or if he fails, why we won't be drawn into the mess. The game can't be won without Cora. With her we can net the millions. Now—"

The Man of the League was about to step from the sidewalk and plunge into the shadows of a square when he caught sight of a man who stood almost within touch.

Paul the convict!

A thrill startled Samson when he noticed the suit and hat described by Anak, and when he approached the man, he saw Dido's charming scar over the eye.

The jail-bird was watching some one whom Samson could not single out. He had the eye of a hawk in his head, and was making good use of it.

Sparks held aloof and watched the man thus unexpectedly encountered. Nothing could have been more opportune. He was sure that Cora had not yet found Nadir, and to prevent disaster to her and to the League, he would throw before her the body of a hunted convict. If he killed Nadir, why, the crime could not be placed at the door of the League; if he failed, he could try again.

He continued to watch the convict until he moved off, still watching his prey.

Samson started after him and caught up in the shadow of a tree.

"I have found you. Good! If you have your man in sight, don't let my appearance cause failure. You did not succeed last night!"

"I did not," growled Paul. "Captain Nadir has the strength of his tiger-cats."

"You found him, then?"

"I did. He held me off, and when he had choked me into insensibility, walked off and left me to recover at my leisure."

"What! didn't he attempt to inform the police?"

"He did nothing of the kind. He even offered to hide me from the street ferrets of Gotham."

"Why, he sent you over the road."

"Of course he did!" cried Paul bitterly. "I'm trying to serve him the same trick now."

"Send him over the road?"

"Yes, but not the one I traveled!" grinned the Sing Sing convict. "That's him ahead of us now—the man who has just stepped into the light of the lamp."

Samson looked at the designated person for a moment.

"He does not suspect you, does he?" he asked Paul.

"No. Dido has made me ten years younger. Nelly did not know me to-night."

"What! did you risk your head about the old premises?" cried Sparks.

"I did. Nobody saw me but the child. Heavens! how beautiful she is! The image of her mother, eh, Samson? She told me that the man with the tigers doesn't hate me at all, that he would not turn me over to the police if he were to find me—"

"You don't believe that?" broke in Samson Sparks.

"I don't want to," was the reply. "Nelly has never lied to me. She believes all that Nadir has said to her, and if I thought he was in earnest—"

"What would you do?"

"I'd go back and let your League finish him!"

Sparks looked astonished into the face of the hunted felon.

"Hal!" cried Paul. "Have I surprised you, Samson? I know more about some things now than I knew last night. I'm not the only person who hates that man yonder. Where is the woman who called on Nelly last night, and then went back to her brown stone front?"

CHAPTER XVII.

209 Q—STREET.

WITH Samson Sparks and the convict walking in the wake of Nadir, the tiger king, let us go back for a little while and keep track of the Queen of the Hidden Hands.

She uttered a startling truth when she told Samson that the orders to kill the tiger-tamer had fallen to her by lot.

She had taken her chances with the rest of the League, and fate had consigned to her the fatal sphere that held the dread command.

When she left her abode after the last brief interview with Samson Sparks, she intended to carry out a certain design as swiftly and noiselessly as possible.

An hour later a figure flitted quickly across a certain street, and knocked at the door of a frame house in the shadow of a pair of trees.

The door was opened by a woman who peered strangely at her visitor, when, seeing that the person was a member of her own sex, she admitted her, and then slipped a bolt into its socket.

In the hall, which was dimly lighted, the night-caller stood revealed as Cora, the Queen of the League. She was clad in close-fitting garments of somber hue, and her shoes had soles of list or rubber.

Without speaking, the woman who had admitted her led the way up-stairs to a small room which contained an old-fashioned globe, several wall maps of the heavens, and other paraphernalia of the astrologer's art.

"Can't you find him, lady?" suddenly asked the fortune-teller, looking at Cora, with a peculiar twinkle in her deep-set, serpent-like eyes.

"I have lost the trail for the present," answered Cora.

"You see I know," laughed the witch, whose age must have been past seventy.

"I know you do, and that is why I'm here."

Cora watched the seeress as she crossed the room, and drew a hanging curtain to one side, revealing a brazen basin on three slender legs. Beneath it glowed a few coals, upon which the woman cast a whitish powder, which sent up bluish flames and volumes of aromatic smoke.

Like many of her class, the Queen of the League was superstitious. She had worn amulets in prison and out, and at that very moment she carried one purchased from Madam Amelie, the woman before her.

Madam Amelie was a female charlatan of the deepest dye; but her cunning and depth of penetration had given her a wide notoriety among those who believed in latter-day necromancy.

By keeping a watch on her victims, by following them from her house to their homes, by the aid of spies, she had obtained over many that mysterious power which she was believed to possess, through communication with the occult.

In short, Madam Amelie was one of the hundreds of second-sight humbugs that infest New York.

For several seconds she stood before the basin, now enveloped in smoke, and regarded with feelings of awe by Cora from her chair.

All at once she came back to her seat at the witch's table.

"It is not strange that you have lost him," said she, catching Cora's eye. "He knows that some one is on his track, and, fox-like, he doubles to escape you."

"Show me the trail, Madam Amelie," exclaimed the Queen of the League. "Which way does it run?"

The old hag was silent for a minute. She did not dare to go too far with the case in hand. Cora had been a good customer; she had emptied a good deal of money into her deceptive coffers, and if she should make a bold prophecy, and miss it, she might lose a good patron.

A fortune-teller goes so far and no further, and Madam Amelie had played witch long enough to know when to draw rein.

She answered the eager woman evasively.

"A doubling fox, when once frightened, is hard to catch," said she.

"I know it, but this one must not escape me."

"He sometimes goes back to his old den—"

"But I am sure this one is not there. It is too early for him to go home."

"Of course," chuckled Madam Amelie.

"What does your Crucible of Knowledge say?"

Cora glanced at the brazen basin as she spoke.

"I will look again," said the witch, rising. "We must make no mistake, lady, you know—no mistake, ba, ba!"

The wrinkled fraud leaned over the basin, and pretended to study its inner surface as if it were the face of a map.

In truth, she was coining a cunning story for Cora—one which should hold her in her power, and keep her hands on her victim's purse-strings.

"It tells me that the fox is near the river," she said at last, withdrawing with the story probably completed in her mind.

"Near the river?" repeated Cora, closely following her. "Which river?"

"The Hudson."

"But that is indefinite. Doesn't the Crucible tell no more?"

"He is now in a short, dark street, where the houses are high and the river not far away."

"That, too, is not enough. It really tells me nothing, Madam Amelie. There are scores of short, dark streets in New York."

"Yes, my child," said the witch of fate promptly, "but all of them do not run down to the river."

"Guide me to this one," exclaimed Cora. "I believe in your wonderful and mysterious powers. You know that, Madam Amelie."

"I forget nothing."

"Then carry your power of second-sight a little further. If the fox is in the dark, little street, keep track of him. Do you see him now?"

Springing from her chair, the old woman threw some more of the white powder on the coals beneath the basin. The blue flames danced up as before, and the smoke grew denser than ever.

"He has entered a house on the street," she went on, looking not at her dupe, but into the misty depths of the crucible.

"Can you see the number above the door?" questioned Cora.

"Yes. It is 209."

"Now look up, or down, to the nearest lamp and name the dark little street."

"I see it, lady," rejoined Madam Amelie.

"Give me the name, quick!"

"It is Q—street."

The Queen of the League was out of the chair in an instant.

"A thousand thanks, but take this besides," cried she handing toward the sorceress half a handful of gold pieces. "You have run down the fox in spite of his doubling as you call it. What does he do at 209 Q—street? Never mind. I will find out for myself."

Cora, with a face flushed with excitement, was near the door. Her hand was reaching out for the knob when Madam Amelie who had taken the money stepped forward and touched her wrist.

"The little street is very dark and it may have bad people," said she looking up into Cora's face.

"Am I afraid? When I want the fox you have unearthed for me, why should I turn back from a street because it is dark and may have bad citizens?"

"The fox may not be there when you reach his last covert."

Madam Amelie half-regretted her play. She might be sending her victim into danger which might rob her of her future patronage and Cora had paid her too liberally for the frauds of the past to be deprived of paying for those mapped out for the future.

But the Queen of the League was determined. She had set out to find Captain Nadir, her enemy, and the shadows of a street with which she was not acquainted were not going to throw her from the trail.

The sorceress was afraid to advise her dupe too strongly against going forward.

She warned Cora to be cautious and let her out.

"Nathan?" called Madam Amelie when she had shut the door on Cora, and immediately there appeared in the hall a dwarfish figure with long arms and bright feverish eyes.

"You saw the lady, Nathan?" continued the fortune-teller.

The man—for man it was—nodded and grinned. There were few people to visit the witch's house whom he did not see. It was his business to see all, to follow them home, to pry into their daily life and in short to furnish the woman he served with everything pertaining to them. Nathan was the spy of the sorceress.

"Follow her, Nathan," Madam Amelie went on. "She may be going into danger, and you must be near if anything happens. She goes to Q—street. You know where it is—near the river. Ah! I see by your eyes that you know. Be off, Nathan. Don't let the lady escape you. She is worth too much to us for that."

The door opened again and Nathan bounded out like a fox.

For a moment he looked up and down the street, then he took off like a well-trained bloodhound and caught sight of Cora on her way to No. 209 Q—street.

It was a long walk for the Queen of the League, but trusting in the pretended revelations of Madam Amelie's crucible, she kept on with eagerness, not once looking back to see whether a spy was at her heels.

"I don't know what takes him to Q—street," she said to herself. "He has but one den of tigers but he may have a friend there. I will commit no blunder, Nadir Bali. You have Therese of Saint Lazare on your track and not the man whose clothes you held while they branded him. Samson Sparks has some coward blood in his veins. I have none."

On, on, under the lamps and through the shadows of Gotham went the tigress of the secret cabal. The moving shadow behind her was Nathan's.

At last she turned into a street which she greeted with an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Two squares and a half yet," said she, noticing a number over a door on her left. "Q—street is dark and quiet sure enough."

She kept on until she found the number 209 over a narrow door set in the exact center of an old frame house.

Cora drew back to look for a convenient place for an ambush, but just then the door was opened from within and a man who had the physique of a giant pitched headlong over the steps and falling almost dead against her sent her reeling with a wild cry toward the middle of the street.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ROGUE AND THE SPIDER.

MADAM AMELIE the sorceress had duped Cora for the twentieth time.

The old humbug knew that the man sought by her victim was not likely to be found at 209 Q—street, and she had named a place totally unknown to her in hopes that Cora would not venture into that part of the city.

Should she visit it, however, and not find the tiger-tamer, she (Madam Amelie) could say that he had not remained long, and then for another golden fee she could put Cora upon another trail just as false.

Such, in brief, was the plan of the fortune-teller, and it was a piece of good luck as well as judgment on her part when she sent Nathan out to watch over Cora and see that no harm came to her.

It happened that the Queen of the Hidden Hands reached the house during a tumult of some kind inside, and, as we have seen, she was struck by the man who was pitched out and knocked into the gutter.

In a moment Nathan was at her side and thanks to his assistance Cora was soon on her feet.

The fuming and swearing individual who had been so summarily ejected was lending her all the help in his power.

He was a large man with a bloated face and huge sandy mustache—a perfect stranger to Cora and one whom she would not want to encounter under all circumstances.

The door had been shut immediately after the stranger's ejection and the house with its closed shutters looked as dark and glum as before.

"I'll get even with all of you!" growled the big man, shaking his fist at the house. "You don't know what I could do if I were to open my mouth. Wait a few days—no, not that long. I'll get even within twenty-four hours."

"Who are in yonder?" asked Cora.

"Three of the biggest rascals in New York!" was the prompt rejoinder.

"Is one of them Nadir Bali?"

"The man who gives shows with his tigers?" exclaimed the giant somewhat surprised at the question.

"Yes," said Cora eagerly.

"No, he isn't in the lot. He never comes to that house. Captain Nadir—I know him—he has other haunts. Do you know him, madam?"

"I have seen him."

"A queer fellow, eh? A man of wonderful strength and powers. Coins money like a mint and his tigers are his fortune. I knew him when he didn't own a stripe, but I guess he's forgotten me."

Cora's curiosity was now greatly excited. If she had missed her prey she had discovered a man who not only knew him, but one whom she could turn to account.

She had entirely forgotten Nathan. The dwarf, who was not to reveal his identity unless circumstances should force it from him, had withdrawn after his assistance, and was now watching Cora as she walked slowly off with the man to whom she had been so suddenly introduced.

"Pardon me," said she, "but I am somewhat interested in this man, Nadir. You knew him before he had tigers, you say?"

" Didn't I?" laughed the man, looking into his companion's face.

"Where?"

He seemed surprised at the question, and the Queen of the League found his eyes riveted upon her with more interest than ever.

"Ah! you want to know all, I see," he went on.

"All that you will tell me."

"Well, I knew him in France. He isn't French, though, and no more Bengalese than I am."

"I know that. You knew Captain Nadir in France?"

"Yes. He was then connected with the most odious of French prisons."

Cora gave a quick start, and made no reply.

"He was sometimes called in to tame the tigresses in Saint Lazare," the big man resumed. "There were some pretty wild ones there, and Nadir's strength was very useful at times. More than once have I seen him tame the pets of the women's prison with his terrible grip."

"You?" cried Cora.

"Yes, madam."

The beautiful plotter of Gotham seemed to shrink from her new acquaintance as if his touch was contagion.

What if he should recognize her as one of the "pets" he had spoken of? But, no, that was well-nigh impossible, for she was then little more than a girl, and intervening years had changed her in every way.

"I have not asked your name. I have been so absorbed in your recollections of this man, whom we both know, that I have been blind to everything else," said Cora.

"I am Reddy, the Rogue," answered the man, smiling. "At least, that is what they would tell you if you were to ask in the house back yonder. But I go by the name of Cad Castile where I am better known."

There was nothing in either of the names to alarm Cora. Both were probably fictitious, and she had heard neither before. Mr. Cad Castile, judging from his nickname, was doubtless a member of that fraternity whose ways are not strictly honest, and the Queen of the League concluded that she did not want to pursue the acquaintance further.

But getting away from Reddy the Rogue was not an easy matter.

When the pair reached a certain corner Cora separated from the big man and had "good-night" on her lips when he came toward her with a smile.

"I'm going your way," said he, the smile changing to a grin. "Since we knew the man with the tigers we ought to become better acquainted."

"Not at all, sir," answered Cora decidedly. "I must bid you good-night here."

"That depends," and Reddy the Rogue came closer still. "Look here; you know something about the old prison. More than one of Nadir's pets have met him since he dealt with them in Saint Lazare. I think I've seen you before. Ah! don't you recollect how they used to march you women into the punishment hall for Nadir—"

Cora broke the big man's sentence with a sharp mad cry.

"I know nothing about it!" exclaimed she. "You can't fasten the stain of a prison upon me."

"Can't I?" laughed the Rogue leering at her in a manner decidedly insulting. "Well, go home and see if I can't."

He drew back and touched his hat with mock courtesy.

"You follow me at your peril!" exclaimed Cora.

"Who talks of following you?" was the response. "I'm in a better business than that. Good-night, madam. Pleasant dreams of Captain Nadir and the walls of Saint Lazare!"

The last sentence was full of sarcasm which still rung in Cora's ears when she had put a square between her and Reddy the Rogue.

What adverse fortune had blown this man across her path! Why was she compelled to meet a rascal that might hold over her head that part of her life which she had guarded as a secret for more than twenty years?

She felt like turning on her heel and following Cad Castile with noiseless step and dark intent.

She might be able to overtake him among the shadows of the night and one blow—like that dealt by the detective's door—would relieve her of a person who might trouble her future. But she did not carry out the mad plan which entered her mind completed and terribly suggestive; but, dismissing the giant from her thoughts as well as she could, she pursued her way with Nathan guarding her as before.

If she could have foreseen the circumstances under which she was to re-encounter Reddy the Rogue, I doubt not she would have turned back with something deadly in her right hand.

Cora did not go home.

She had missed the tiger-tamer, but had not given up the hunt for the night.

At one time she thought of going back to Madam Amelie's and getting that woman to consult the Crucible of Knowledge once more, but she turned suddenly into a street which led her away from the fortune-teller's, and Nathan, believing that his work was done, abandoned the pursuit.

An hour afterward the figure of a woman appeared in front of Lloyd Loris's house.

It was Cora!

From her hunt for Nadir she had come to the home of the man against whom she had directed the cunning and power of the secret League.

Had she tracked the tiger-tamer to the banker's house?

We saw him last followed by Paul the convict beside whom walked Samson Sparks, the spy.

Cora had seen a man enter the house despite the lateness of the hour—a man whom she had followed several squares with the caution of the noiseless hound of the trail.

She drew near to the house, creeping along the stone walls until she reached the steps.

Beyond the door dwelt the man for whose unlimited wealth she was playing a deep and desperate game. If two men were out of her way she would ring the bell in broad daylight and walk into the nabob's parlor prepared to conquer.

Cora saw a light beyond the shutters nearest the door.

Seeing that the street was deserted, she mounted the steps, and leaned toward the window, sustaining herself by clutching the stone sill.

For a moment she saw nothing, then she made out the figures of two men in the room before her.

One look was enough, but the Queen of the League fastened her eyes on the pair, but more particularly on the one who was talking in low tones to the gentleman with gray hair.

Danton, the detective, was closeted with Loris.

Cora could imagine that he was explaining the case as he had lately followed it, perhaps giving Loris an account of the murder at his door. At any rate, the rich man was listening intently, his face without color, and his hands thin and bloodless.

All at once Lloyd Loris fell back in his chair with a sigh that reached Cora's ears. He lay back amid the crimson velvet like a person dead.

"He has swooned!" exclaimed the Queen of the League. "Danton's story has been too much for him. No, he has recovered. My God! is the man mad?"

Loris had fairly bounded from his chair, and with heaving bosom and flashing eyes, he now stood before the detective, like a man on the threshold of a terrible deed.

"The coil tightens while you work!" he cried, the woman at the window catching every syllable. "I feel the cords of the League cutting through to the bone. You know who are at the head of this desperate conspiracy—the adventuress of Paris, the woman of Saint Lazare, and the man of the galleys. Captain Nadir's revelation drives me mad. Will you obey my commands, Danton?"

"I will," answered the detective, who seemed to have lost none of his coolness.

"Then seek out this pantheress as soon as possible, and tell her what you know. You know enough to send her to the sheriff's noose. Will you do this, Captain Danton?"

"I will obey you."

"When?"

"Before noon to-morrow."

Cora dropped from the window with a cry whose ending was a bitter laugh.

CHAPTER XIX.

QUEEN CORA'S TRAP.

"BEFORE noon to-morrow, did he say! Ah! we shall see!"

These were the words that dropped from the lips of the woman who fled from the steps of the banker's house and disappeared round the nearest corner.

Half an hour afterward this same person let herself into Cora Catlin's house, and stood under the chandelier in the sumptuous parlor with traces of her recent excitement still visible in her eyes.

It was past midnight.

She had lost the tiger-tamer, but fortune had enabled her to make an important discovery.

The hour of Danton's visit was not far off.

She had time to snatch a little sleep so as to appear fresh for the scene.

He was to cross her threshold—that is, if the unknown holder of the fatal ballot did not find him before dawn; he was to tell her that it was in his power to drag her from the luxury by which she was surrounded to the bar of justice, and to send her from thence to the scaffold.

For what?

Her past life could not exact such penalty from the law. Her plots against Lloyd Loris and his millions did not constitute a capital offense. No! The Shadow Sharp knew something more than all this. He had not played the silent secret-tracker for nothing during the past few days.

Cora's cheek blanched when she looked the danger that menaced her squarely in the face.

Danton, the detective, had solved the mystery of the murder at his door. He knew who had stabbed the unknown man who had died at the hospital—knew it as certainly as if he had witnessed the deed.

There was no other answer to Cora's mental question of: What does the sleuth-hound know?

She occupied the parlor but a few moments after her return home.

"A little sleep, then victory!" she exclaimed. "I will show this human shadow to-morrow that his plans will come to naught. He may know enough to send me to the noose, but the man whose trail-dog he is shall never see me in its coils."

She passed up the heavily-carpeted steps and looked in upon a dark-faced child asleep on a rich couch.

It was Iris.

"I will see that she witnesses nothing to-morrow," murmured the Queen of the League, as she withdrew, and Iris slept on undreamful of the visit.

Night soon afterward gave place to another day; Cora was astir before the first glints of sunshine gilded the loftiest spires of the great city.

She looked refreshed by the short sleep, and as the sun crept higher, arrayed herself in a superb reception robe.

Iris did not come down-stairs and Cora was not disturbed in the parlor.

When would he come?

He had told Loris that he would confront her before noon, but the exact hour had not been set, and she could only conjecture.

More than once as the morning crept on, and the sun sailed zenithward through the warm skies, the schemer of two shores looked out through the heavy lace curtains of her front windows. She longed to hear the step of the detective. She panted for a sight of his well-built figure on her step.

Let the reader know that Cora did not wait for Danton without having prepared for him.

Her visit to the outside of Lloyd Loris's house had forewarned her, and in her parlors she waited for the man she hated with an eagerness which she could hardly conceal.

The clock on the mantel was sending its silvery chimes throughout the room when a man turned from the smooth flags of the sidewalk toward the house.

"The fox is at the door of the trap!" she exclaimed at the same time sending a swift glance toward a pair of sliding mahogany doors which stood slightly apart.

The tenth stroke of the clock had just died away when the bell tinkled clearly.

Cora was trusting to no servants now. She went to the door herself.

The following minute she stood face to face with the Shadow Sharp of Gotham, so neatly clad and polished that one not in the secret would not have taken him for the evil-doer's enemy.

A swift look passed between the two, but Cora did not betray the secret she had kept locked in her bosom for three hours.

She led the way to the parlor where Danton politely declined the chair to which she waved him but stood erect with his penetrating gaze riveted on her face.

"Madam," began the detective, "I have called on a matter of business which can be transacted without unnecessary delay."

A faint smile arched Cora's lips.

How formal he was, yet his voice did not seem stern for under any circumstances the Shadow Sharp of New York knew how to keep his natural tones.

"You know Lloyd Loris, the banker of M—avenue," he continued.

"I know him."

"I am here in his interests as well as in your own."

"I am listening, Mr. Danton."

"Madam, you will at once withdraw from the game against Lloyd Loris."

"From the game!" responded Cora, half-questioningly and with another furtive glance at the polished doors.

"I am not here to talk in riddles," Danton went on. "You will withdraw from the plot

designed to ruin the banker or I shall arrest you for murder!"

These words which were firmly spoken drove Cora of the League back a step.

She flushed to the temples, then a derisive laugh parted her lips.

"That is plain," said she. "It is a cold, cruel charge, thrown out without proof for the purpose of unnerving the woman against whom it has been made."

"Just as you think, madam," rejoined the American Vidocq. "Throw another card on the street or beneath a roof and discover whether or not I have warned you falsely. Without proof, did you say?" He took a step toward Cora. "A woman whose whole life is known to me from the cells of Saint Lazare to the present hour ought not to laugh at a threat like the one just spoken. One more play, Madam Talcott—one more move against Lloyd Loris, Convict No. 99, and the blood of the unknown wretch who went from the gutter to the hospital will not cry in vain for vengeance."

Cora was white save on her lips where shone a drop of freshly drawn blood. Her figure seemed to rise an inch in stature, she stepped back from Danton, the detective, threw up her hand and—the sliding portals parted.

The Shadow Sharp half-facing the doors at the time caught sight of the three figures by whom he was confronted.

He saw that they were powerful men, that the face of each was covered from forehead to chin with a black velvet mask upon which was worked in silver thread the badge of the Hidden Hands.

Besides this he saw the three cocked revolvers that looked him in the face with the sternness of death itself.

"You have my answer in the spectacle before you, sleuth-hound of the nabob!" rang out the voice of Cora, as she covered Danton with quivering finger. "The fox is cunning, but he gets into the trap at last, and his skin very often adorns the coop he has repeatedly robbed. Stand where you are, nor lift your voice, nor move a hand! If you know my past you must know that nothing daunts me, that nothing turns me from the chosen pathway. You have been on the trail a long time, Danton of New York. You know too much for the safety of the game at which you have just hinted. Your career begins to end where you stand. The grip of the Hidden Hands is as deadly as the grip of death itself. The Brethren of Silence will advance and take charge of you. The slightest show of resistance will snuff out the life you have devoted to the nabob and his cause. The woman you have denounced yields a power which all the Shadow Sharps of Gotham cannot break! Brethren, your prisoner awaits you."

Danton the shadower saw the three men advance as one, but did not move.

Perhaps he had noticed that the door leading into the hall was closed and apparently locked.

He might make a dash for freedom, but could he hope to be successful?

No; he was in the power of the League he had been tracking.

A moment after Cora's last word a hand fell upon the detective's shoulder. He fell back at the touch, as if it were electrical, but he did not resist.

He was the prisoner of the Hidden Hands, and the coolness with which the queen had addressed him, coupled with the triumphant glitter of the eyes behind the masks and the cold stare of the revolvers, told him that he could expect no mercy.

"This is your hour of triumph," said Danton, looking at Cora. "I am led to believe that you are going to play out the hand you hold."

"To the last trump!" exclaimed the Queen of the League. "I shall sit serenely on the throne of success while the paid Shadow of the nabob haunts as a ghost the aisles of the dead. Away with him! Brethren of Silence, you have heard the orders of your queen."

As Cora turned away, with a last insulting look, the hands of the trio tightened on the Shadow Sharp.

"The best cards are yours to-day," he murmured. "But in the end the trumps shall all be mine!"

CHAPTER XX.

A NEST TO BE FEATHERED.

NELLY POLLEN, the convict's daughter, had just come in from her morning newspaper sales on the street. She was taking off her hat, when she fell back from the sight of a strange man who occupied a chair in one corner of the room looking at her in a manner that made her heart stand still.

A moment later, the girl started forward and laughed at the surprise her visitor had given her.

"Don't you know it isn't good for you to come here so often?" she exclaimed.

"Mebbe not," answered the convict. "I guess they won't see Paul Pollen through Dido's paint," and he laughed.

"Who is Dido?" asked the girl.

"Old Anak's Cerberus, and now you don't

know any more than you did before. But let that pass. I want you to tell me all that he said."

"All that who said?"

"Nadir, the tiger-tamer—the man who sent me up the river."

"I'll gladly do that," responded Nelly.

"Because you want us to be friends, eh?" smiled the convict, shrugging his shoulders.

"Yes."

"Now, go on."

The girl proceeded, and gave her father a full report of her late interviews with the tiger-tamer, not omitting the attempt of the (to her) unknown man who would have taken his life if he had not been frightened off by the beasts.

To all this Paul Pollen listened with a good deal of interest and curiosity. He did not interrupt Nelly once to the end of her story.

"I was after him last night again," said he when he spoke once more.

"After Captain Nadir?"

"Yes."

"I had hoped you would make peace." Paul did not speak for a moment.

"I was not alone on the trail," he said, suddenly. "I had company, Nell."

"Company?"

"Yes, the man who went to his house was with me."

"Who is he?" asked the girl.

"Never mind that. We'll get to that point further along in the game. Nelly, do you know why they want to finish Captain Nadir?"

"It is all dark to me."

"You had a lady caller not long ago?"

"I had."

"What was her name?"

"I don't know."

"What did she want?"

"She wanted me to come and live with her."

"Where?"

"As I would not promise she would not tell me. "But," and the girl's eyes grew bright with victory, "I got the best of her after all."

"How?"

"I found out something about her."

"You're a shrewd girl, Nell," exclaimed the convict. "You'll succeed at anything. Who is the woman?"

"I don't know her name, but as I know where she lives, the rest can be had for the asking, you know."

"I can supply the name. I am sure of it."

"You?"

"Try me."

Whereupon Nelly told her father where her visitor resided, and he immediately replied with the name of—

"Cora Catlin!"

"Her visit surprised me," continued the girl. "How did she find me out, and why would she want me to live with her, knowing my history as she must?"

"That is just what I'm going to find out," said the convict. "The man who went to Nadir's house to finish him and that woman are friends. More than that, they are at the head of a conspiracy, and I've been puzzling my brains trying to find out. There may be more money in this than revenge. If the conspiracy is against somebody who has the ducats—and I believe it is, from what I know of the man with the scar—I'm sure we can feather our nest. The police won't look for me much longer. My crime wasn't so great, you know, Nell, and they're not going to spend much time trying to pick me up."

"I'm glad of that," exclaimed Nelly, her eyes dilating with delight. "You had best not hide here, though."

"No, I have a nest, and the wonderful Dido has a brush," laughed Paul. "After awhile it will be safe for me to appear on the surface again; but not just yet. He wanted me to go on and track Nadir down last night. I know him. Why, Nelly, I'm bad enough myself; but, by heavens! I'm not marked!"

"Marked?" echoed the girl, hardly knowing the import of her echo.

"Marked! Branded like a wild steer!" cried Paul, the jail-bird. "I'm bad enough, I say, but I'm not marked for life. Mebbe I oughtn't open against him so, seeing who he is, but last night, when I heard him urging me on against the tiger-tamer, my very blood seemed to boil, and I knew that he wanted him out of the way for a purpose of his own. Now, let me find out who they're playing against, then I'll show a hand that may surprise somebody, but nevertheless it will feather our nest, as I have said."

The hunted convict left his chair and picked up his hat.

"Are you going back to Anak's?" questioned Nelly.

"Not just yet."

"It is broad daylight."

"What of that?"

"They are still looking for you."

"Let them look. I passed a dozen of the blue-coated statuses coming over to see you. Dido is a dandy with the brush. Do you think, Nell, that I'd find Captain Nadir at home now?"

The girl started.

"Have you softened enough toward him to go to his house?" she asked.

"Business is business. The scheme is to feather our nest. What do you think?"

"Nadir gives his tigers their lessons every day at eleven. It lacks twenty minutes of that hour now."

"I can catch him at home!" and the convict moved toward the door. "Remember, Nell, there's something deep afoot, and I've come back in time to take a hand in the game in our own interest. I'll get a clew at Captain Nadir's. I think I know how to deal with him. Good-bye, girl. If you see me on the street, remember, no recognition, no nothing." And the door opened and shut, and the man from Sing Sing was gone.

It did not occupy all of the twenty minutes for Paul Pollen to reach the abode of the tiger king.

His summons brought Nadir himself to the door, and three tigers eyed him fiercely as he was invited in, and conducted to the little parlor to the left of the hall.

However well he had deceived the police of New York, a second was enough to convince him that the eyes of the tiger-tamer had penetrated his disguise.

Perhaps Nadir had not forgotten the eyes he had encountered in room No. 19 of the gambler's paradise, and here they were again, the same dark orbs, though not so fierce as then.

The showman did not shut out the tigers when he led his guest into the parlor, but let them slouch in at will, rubbing their sleek sides against Paul's legs, causing involuntary starts and looks of terror.

"I don't wonder that he didn't stay!" broke forth the convict, with another look at the beasts.

A smile came to Captain Nadir's lips, and remained there for a moment.

"You have not forgotten what took place in room Number 19," pursued Paul. "Gods! You have the grip of a death hand! I don't know how long I laid there, but fortunately I got away unmolested. You must have meant what you said."

"About offering you an asylum? I did. I never had anything against you, Paul Pollen. I happened to see a certain act. I couldn't shut my eyes to it, and I was sorry to open the iron doors to a fellow-man. For your child's sake—"

"There!" broke in Paul. "Let's leave her out of the case altogether."

"Just as you say," said Nadir, smoothing the hair of the tigress, half in his lap.

"I don't want your life as much as I did. I'm not unreasonable, Captain Nadir. Did you see me after you last night?"

"You were not alone?"

"No. I did have a companion some distance. Did you know him, too?"

"Yes."

"Wasn't you almost impelled to come back and catch him at the throat?"

"Not quite so bad as that," laughed the tiger-tamer. "Your companion is a sly rogue. He doubtless gave you some good advice last night?"

"He did, keeping an eye on number one," was the reply.

"He always does that."

"Captain Nadir, what is Samson Sparks after now?"

The abruptness of the question seemed to surprise Nadir.

He stopped smoothing Nina's back, and looked at the convict in silence.

"If I've struck too hard, don't answer," continued Paul. "I know he's up to something deep. He is not alone. The woman is with him. I haven't been back long enough to catch on. When I went away Samson Sparks wasn't in the city. He told me a few days before they nabbed me that he was going out of the country, to be gone some time. He had a game of some kind in view then. I don't know whether the woman was here or not then."

"She was," replied the man with the tigers.

"She stayed behind to watch the game, eh—to see that it did not get away?"

"Just so."

"Samson Sparks never throws his net for small fish," continued the convict. "He never divides the catch, either, when he can help it. But, as I have said, if you don't want to tell me anything on the theory that a man who has worn stripes is not to be trusted, all right. Nell has come between us, Captain Nadir. You have won her heart, and I don't hate you enough to play assassin, and I won't follow the advice of Samson Sparks!"

The tiger-tamer saw that the man before him spoke his honest convictions. The convict was not so bad after all, but he wanted to feather his stripped nest in some way."

"If I ain't to be trusted, say nothing, Captain Nadir," he resumed. "Once a thief, always a thief! I can go back to the old trade again. It's very easy. By Jove! I won't go to Samson Sparks and to the woman who wanted to coax Nell from home. I'd like to beat her game for that. I thought mebbe I could get a clew by coming here; but when they sent me up I guess they built a barrier between us—"

"Hold, Paul!" interrupted Captain Nadir.

"If you take a hand in this game, the police will soon smell you out."

"With Dido's brush to help us!" cried the convict. "I can play my cards in the dark. I will work wherever you put me. When I know something about the scheme—"

"Briefly, it is this: They are going to ruin Lloyd Loris, the millionaire banker, and more than kill his beautiful daughter Floy."

"Then count me in!" and Paul the pickpocket seized the tiger-tamer's hand. "I am now against Samson Sparks and the queen of the plot. If I help to baffle them I needn't pickpockets any more, eh, Captain Nadir?"

The answer was one word:

"Never!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DUNGEONS OF THE LEAGUE.

THESE events—the interview in the house in the alley and Paul's alliance with Nadir the tiger king—occurred shortly after the seizure of Danton the detective by the members of the League at Cora's house.

Of course neither the tiger-tamer nor the convict knew anything of this shrewd play by the conspirators, and when Paul Pollen left Nadir's house he retraced his steps toward Anak's shop.

Night falling over the city saw Nadir ascend the stair to the detective's quarters. He found the door locked and the room dark beyond.

An hour later he came back and found the place in the same condition.

This time he was followed.

For several squares he had been dogged by two figures that had sharp eyes and almost noiseless tread.

They watched Nadir disappear in the open hallway and waited for him to come out, which he did after a brief absence.

It was evident that the tiger-tamer was disappointed. His restlessness showed that he wanted to see Danton, and the shadow's absence seemed to resolve itself into a mystery which he could not fathom.

After his last visit he started off rapidly followed by the two men as before. If he had turned back he would have collided with them before they could have escaped, but the man with the tigers did not appear to suspicion that he was followed.

All at once the night trailers rushed forward at Nadir like Malay stranglers.

They timed their movements so as to overtake the tiger-tamer at the mouth of a certain alley where there was no lamp and where the houses cast the entire sidewalk in shadow.

The victim did not scent danger until the two were about to throw themselves upon him.

He fell back the moment he saw them and interposed his arms in resistance, but the attack was not to be beaten off thus and in a moment the showman found himself amid the shadows of the alley with a cloth over his head and choked nearly to insensibility besides.

The villains had acted in concert and when the cloth was tightened shutting off every particle of air from his lungs Nadir knew that he was at the complete mercy of the Hidden Hands.

Some time afterward, the tiger-tamer knew not how long, he opened his eyes in a place as dark as the caves of Egypt. He was standing upright with his back against a wall to which he was secured by means of ropes which encircled his arms and body.

He could see nothing and not a sound came to his ears.

"What will the cats do without me?" thought the showman, his first apprehension being for his tigers. "If they are not fed they will become furious, leap through the windows and attack people on the street. Ah! may they not be doing so now? I don't know how long I have been here. They caught me about ten o'clock at night. It is night all the time here. This is your work, witch of Saint Lazare. I see your hand in the turn of the dice!"

By and by Nadir thought he heard a noise. It was so faint at first, a mere squeak somewhere in the gloom, that he feared to credit it lest he had been deceived. But in a short time it was not only repeated, but was reinforced by others so numerous that he no longer doubted his senses nor guessed at the cause.

He had been transferred to the kingdom of rats!

His next thought was that he was in an underground chamber adjacent to the large rat-infested sewers of the city. He knew how the large rodents swarmed unmolested in their subterranean preserves, and despite his stout-heartedness a cold chill crept down his spine.

In a few seconds it was squeak, squeak everywhere.

Nadir would have given one of his tigers to have had his prison illuminated by one good ray of penetrating light. It was horror itself to be strapped to a wall with an army of sewer-rats advancing upon him, and himself at the mercy of their sharp teeth.

"In God's name," cried Nadir, "this is devilish! Avast there, you poisonous imps!"

At sound of his voice which echoed strangely throughout the place the noises grew still and the tiger-tamer had peace for awhile. But when the

rats recommenced they were bolder than before and in a little time to make up for their former timidity they ran across his feet and clung to his pantaloons.

Again and again he frightened them off with his voice, but their intervals of silence each time decreased in brevity and at last they gathered at his feet and set up cries of hunger and defiance and were not repulsed at all by his commands.

It had not taken the tiger-tamer until this time to realize the full extent of the League's play. He had been carried to the underground chamber of horrors to be devoured by the legion of rats known to infest it.

He was to stand no longer between Cora Catlin and success. His tigers might starve in the big house and be killed by the police, but he was to die the most horrible of deaths, shut off from the world and lost to it forever.

If a man could break hempen bonds steeped in pitch Nadir Bali would have broken his and defied the vermin eager for their feast of human blood.

He knew nothing about the extent of his prison only he believed that he was at the end of a long corridor down which he had been carried insensible by his captors.

In the moments of excitement he thought of Danton, of Paul Pollen.

If the detective knew of his situation he would come to the rescue; if the convict missed him would he not defy the dogs of the law and follow the trail like a bloodhound?

But, then, when would either of these rescuers come? When it would be too late! When they could cut loose a few bones from ropes of death and frighten the last gorged rat from his feast!

All at once at the ending of his last effort to drive the encircling hordes of vermin from his legs, the tiger-tamer heard a sound which seemed to come through a wall on his right.

He leaned in that direction as far as his cords would allow.

"Who is there?" he cried. "I heard your voice, but it sounded faintly. Who are you? A prisoner like myself?"

"I am a prisoner," was the response, which Nadir heard plainly now, for the unseen had probably raised his voice.

"I am Nadir, the tiger-tamer!" sent back the man in the dark.

"My God! I am Dan Danton!" was the reply.

A singular sensation passed through the tiger-tamer's brain.

The Shadow Sharp was a prisoner like himself, and each was powerless to help the other.

"Where did they net you?" asked the detective.

"On the street. I was caught by two men as strong as my tigers, and a cloth steeped in chloroform was thrown over my head. Did they serve you the same dastardly trick?"

"No. I was caught in broad daylight."

"The deuce you were!"

"I was netted in Cora Catlin's parlor by three hooded members of the League."

"And brought to this place forthwith?"

"No. I was kept in the house till night. Then I was taken out to the rear of the premises, and smuggled blindfolded to the spot where I now find myself. They are playing a desperate hand now."

"It means death to all people in their way. What took you to the abode of the woman of Saint Lazare?"

"I went to tell her to desist in her plot against Lloyd Loris or be arrested for murder."

"And you found her ready for you?"

"I did."

"Who betrayed you?"

"I cannot imagine. I am certain that the Queen of the League knew I was coming. The play was decided by the nabob and myself."

"You were overheard by a spy."

"It must be so."

A moment's silence followed.

The rats had withdrawn from Nadir's feet, and were having a pitched battle some distance down the corridor.

"Are you bound to anything?" suddenly resumed the tiger king.

"I am secured to what seems to be a wall of iron, but it is too dark for me to see, and I am not permitted to use my hands."

Captain Nadir had to smile grimly to himself, for he was in the same situation.

"Help must come from without," he went on, after a spell of silence.

"From whom, Captain Nadir? You forget that we are the two allies who are wanted out of the way by Samson Sparks and Cora Lloyd Loris, suspecting nothing of this kind, must not be expected to help us. We must make a supreme effort to help ourselves."

"You forget the man from Sing Sing."

Nadir heard an exclamation of astonishment follow his last words.

"Why, that man would like to see you rot here," said the detective. "Nelly would help us if she could, but her father—Why, you sent him up, man!"

Captain Nadir laughed.

"I formed an alliance with Paul Pollen awhile before they caught me," he said. "The pick-

pocket is in earnest. He wants to feather his nest by baffling the plot of the League. Now if he should strike our trail—”

“One chance in a million!” interrupted Danton. “Would the jail-bird fight the conspiracy single-handed?”

“He has the grit of a Greek,” answered Nadir. “When he misses me he will shadow Samson Sparks—”

“Who may never lead him this way, but in the opposite direction. As I have said, our chances for a rescue by the escaped convict are what one is to a million.”

There was no reply. Nadir had acknowledged the truth of this by his silence.

CHAPTER XXII.

A THUNDERBOLT.

HAVING disposed of the two men who had been troubling her for some time, Cora Catlin the Queen of the Hidden Hands prepared to play her winning card.

She would not have begun this movement if she had not believed that Danton and the tiger-tamer were surely out of the way and in the future would give her no more trouble.

The person selected last by ballot to deal with the detective had failed to do so, and as we have seen, it remained for Cora herself to circumvent Danton by the prompt action displayed in the parlors of her own home.

Lloyd Loris, as a matter of course, knew nothing of the two captures.

On the day after Cora's triumph he sat alone in his library following every step as it approached his house in hopes that it was bringing the detective with his report of victory.

At length the bell rung without having been preceded by a footstep, and the millionaire prey of the League heard the maid trip down the hall to answer the summons.

“A lady at the door. Wants an interview,” said the maid, appearing on the library threshold.

The nabob started and lost some color.

A lady instead of the detective? He did not like the substitution, but there seemed no help for it.

Calming himself he ordered the visitor to be admitted, and then settled back in his chair to wait for her.

In a short time a footfall approached the door which he was watching like a hawk, and then it opened to admit Cora.

For the first time in more than twenty years the two persons now in the library stood face to face.

Cora advanced with her eyes fastened on Loris, while he in return regarded her with no less interest.

It was evident that he knew her, that he saw that the person who confronted him was not Cora Catlin, but Therese Talcott, the adventuress.

He waved her to a chair with his usual dignity, and seemed to detect the faint smile of triumph that gathered on her lips.

“To whom am I indebted for this visit, madam?” queried Loris, though his look told that the question was useless.

Cora knew that he had recognized her.

“It seems unnecessary for me to answer,” said she. “I am known as Cora Catlin, but you have a memory which goes back a number of years, crossing the sea, and recalling scenes which I need not mention.”

Loris regarded her for another moment in silence.

“I have a memory and it does not require your visit to freshen it,” said he with resolution. “Woman, I have felt your hand often enough of late to give you no welcome at this time. I shall not negotiate in any manner with you.”

He was still relying on Danton the detective. The Shadow Sharp might have missed his quarry, and he was not going to let her play a successful hand beneath his roof.

The Queen of the League appeared to discern his motives.

“The past may not startle you,” she began, “but it remains a skeleton in your closet just the same. You may amass thousands and take your ease in your palace of wealth, but the recollections of a certain night when you engaged in a certain affair can summon you in an instant from paradise to the lowest depths of purgatory. I have been dead a long time to you. It was said, and you have rejoiced over the falsehood, that Therese took her own life long ago, tired of the world and its follies. Does it look so to you now?”

“Woman, I see before me the curse of my existence,” was the reply.

“Once the joy of it, shall I say?” smiled Cora. “I have a memory as well as yourself, Lloyd Loris. I recollect the night in a certain *cafe* when two men, heated over their wine, bandied my name between them, and then retired to fight a disgraceful duel under the trees. I recall how the man who wants his reputation kept from his fellow-creatures at all hazards fled from Paris after the encounter; how, coming back to America, he began to make money; how he afterward married—so it is said—and how, guarding his secret all the time, he raised his child in ignorance of her father's past. You

forget that you have been the sole owner of that secret. You forget how the odium of that midnight duel clung to me for years, forcing me to surrender my name and take up another so that I could live in peace.”

A proud, derisive smile came to Loris's face while he listened to the woman who was talking thus with all the assurance of a female Mephistopheles.

Suddenly he waved his hand with a gesture of impatience.

“What do you want?” asked he. “What brings you here?”

The question seemed to rebuff Cora, but only for a moment.

“I ask you to right the past,” she replied.

“What is there about it to be righted? Do you want to go back on your old name?”

The plotter flushed.

“Do you want New York to know that Therese Talcott, once of Paris, did not help herself out of the world, but that, as Cora Catlin, she has been received into its society?”

The flush deepened, mounting crimson to the woman's temples.

“If this is your wish,” pursued Loris, in the same tones, “make your demands. The time has arrived for a settlement between us.”

The forced coolness with which the nabob spoke seemed to give Cora courage and to furnish her with new weapons.

She had not played to be repulsed thus. The shafts fired from his bow, though they quivered in the target, only nerved her to the climax.

“I see,” cried she, with a haughty smile. “The defiance of a man who expects his wealth to help him through! What would your child say were she to know the true history of your life? You have toiled for her; your slavery at Mammon's court has been for the sole purpose of making her the bonanza queen of this city. At the same time you have guarded the Parisian secret with the same care that a man guards his life. You have hedged yourself about with sleuth-hounds: you have set them on the trail of every shadow that flitted across your path, fearing that the shadow would turn to substance.

“You have brought up your child in total ignorance of the secrets whose revealment would blight her life. What do I want, Lloyd Loris? Justice! reparation!”

He looked at her in amazement.

“Don't you know what I can do?” he exclaimed. “I am not powerless, woman.”

“Not powerless, perhaps, but you see before you one who can cope with you and your detectives. You may tell New York that I am Therese of Paris—you may lay bare the whole of my life, as you profess to know it, but Floy and the world shall know all that you have guarded so well. What do I call justice and reparation do you ask?”

The nabob of Gotham did not speak.

“Right the past by giving your child a new mother,” she went on.

Loris burst into a cynical laugh, at the end of which he dropped back into the haughty tones he had assumed.

“Woman, for coolness and impudence you take the prize,” he went on. “I am neither to be bled nor forced to disgrace my child by the marriage you propose.”

In another moment the Queen of the League stood before the man who looked at her from the depths of his chair.

“Then we will see how Floy enjoys long-kept secrets,” she replied, cuttingly. “The girl has had a shock I bear. Her nerves are in a splendid condition to receive another. We will recall the past for her benefit, and as we are not compelled to confine ourselves to Paris, we will ask your daughter to come to you for a glimpse of her mother's marriage.”

“What!” cried the nabob, pallid in an instant.

“We will refer Floy, your child, to the church records of the Parish of Petersham, England, where you say stands the record of your marriage. Those records show nothing of the kind. Another well-kept secret for the child you have raised in the shadow of a falsehood.”

“In God's name, have you lost none of your coolness in twenty years?” exclaimed Loris.

“None of it,” was the quick response. “I am here to offer the only compromise my tongue can speak. You have had your outburst of defiance. Let us come down to business. The detective who has taken your gold has left the trail. You have no proof of the past which I fear, but not as you fear yours. I am not afraid of your Shadow Sharp, nor, to be plain, do I blanch when I think of the revelations another man might make if he could step forth at your beck. Lloyd Loris, I hold the hand that wins! You can touch no bell whose sound will bring success to your rescue. I stand in your path—I, Therese Talcott, as you inwardly call me—the woman you knew years ago—the woman for whom you fought, and whose existence you have thought she ended by her own hand. I have made my demand. It is inexorable! I will give you time for reflection. At eight o'clock to-night I will return for a reply.

The remedy is in your hands. I shall expect a straightforward answer, for I hold the keys of life and death, and the hand you kissed in Paris will be merciless only at your bidding.”

The Gotham nabob saw his visitor step back and bestow upon him a parting glance.

“Remember! To night at eight!” said Cora. He made no reply, but sat rigid in his chair, white and staring.

She left him thus, passing from the house without being bowed out by any one, and vanishing down the street, where the warm sunlight shimmered through the velvet leaves of the maples.

The prey of the League did not move until he heard the front door close on Queen Cora's figure. Then he left the chair, walked across the room and took a silver-mounted revolver from a drawer.

His lips were glued together and bloodless.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE NEW TRAIL-HOUND.

“She links to her coolness the audacity of Satan!” said Loris aloud. “What sort of hand has she played that she is not afraid to come to me with the demand and threat? She knows that I would not have the secret reach Floy's ears for all the wealth I possess. It would first blight the girl's life and then take it. Samson Sparks keeps in the background, but I see his directing hand in the piece of acting I have just witnessed. Where is Danton the shadower? She boasts that he has left the trail. I won't believe it, though nearly twenty-four hours have passed since he was to have visited her and present my ultimatum. Instead of his return she comes. And she says she does not fear the other man who knows so much about her. That means Nadir, the tiger-tamer. I will see who has left the trail, and who is still upon it!”

At the expiration of the first half-hour after the visit of the Queen of the Hidden Hands, Lloyd Loris climbed the stairs that led to Danton's quarters.

He found the door closed and locked.

“You won't find him in,” said a voice further down the hall and the nabob turned to confront Mr. Benson.

“He hasn't been here since yesterday, a little before ten,” continued Benson. “Perhaps he went away, sir. He was dressed up and had a cane, something he never carries unless there's something unusual in the air.”

Since yesterday! The words had a depressing meaning in the mind of Loris. He looked at the locked door and went down to the street disappointed and mystified.

On the sidewalk he was picked up by a pair of eyes that seemed to fill with joy the moment they espied him, and when he started off they kept him in sight.

When the nabob took a car the eyes did the same and when he walked a pair of legs kept them in his wake.

The anxious banker crossed the city to the side nearest the Hudson and at last turned into a street which would have had a very quiet appearance, but for a crowd on the sidewalk some distance further on.

“I believe the crowd is in front of Nadir's house,” murmured Loris. “At least, the tiger-tamer lives near by.”

As he neared the crowd he saw it draw back suddenly and then he noticed the blue uniforms of two policemen.

“The showman seems to have run off and left his beasts,” said a man of whom the banker inquired the cause of the excitement. “They've been going on all night and you can hear 'em fighting inside as if they had gone back to their original state and smelt blood.”

“When was Nadir seen last?”

“Not since yesterday or the day before,” was the reply. “The officers are going to kill the tigers. A tiger-hunt in New York will be nuts for the papers.”

All this time the pair of eyes that had followed the millionaire from Danton's quarters were still on the watch. They saw him mingle with the accumulating crowd and were within hearing distance while he conversed with one of the police.

“The tigers are undoubtedly famished,” said the officer. “We have just sent for a lot of meat, which we shall get to them by means of the transom. They may have turned on their master and killed him, or he may have run away. We don't want to kill the beasts and won't do so as long as we can help it. Do you know Nadir, sir?”

Loris started a little as he replied.

“I guess the tiger-tamer is pretty generally known,” and then he put a question. “Do you suspect foul play?”

“We have expressed no opinion,” rejoined the officer with dignity. “Nadir has all the characteristics and habits of the professional showman; you may draw your own conclusions, sir,” and he walked over to his companions who were watching the head of a tiger through the slats of one of the front shutters.

Lloyd Loris did not tarry. There was nothing for him at the house, but more mystery and it kept his mind busy enough until he was far from the place.

He did not believe that Nadir Bali would will-

ingly desert the animals which had filled his coffers again and again with hard cash. He knew of the journey to his house of the Man of the League who had gone there for the purpose of removing him, for Danton had given him the story as obtained from the tiger-tamer and Nelly Pollen.

The League had repeated the attempt with better success. It had found Nadir elsewhere than in the city haunt of his pets and the man who had failed once—Samson Sparks—had crowned his efforts with success.

This is why Cora Catlin could say that she did not fear the man who could bring her before the world in a light that would dash all her schemes to earth. The League had encountered Nadir, and no longer feared the man who had "tamed" Cora more than once in the odious prison of Saint Lazare.

Loris kept his thoughts and conclusions to himself. He could have put the police of Gotham on a startling trail, but the information he held would extort from him a confession which he would not make for the wealth of the world.

The banker's lips lost their blood when he thought that he had been left to fight the conspiracy single-handed. Well might they do so if this were true!

At eight o'clock the door-bell would ring again, and the evil genius of his existence—the cool, calculating and merciless Queen of the League—would come for his answer.

A thousand wild thoughts and plans jostled one another in Loris's brain. Like a man driven to the wall, he thought of a dozen things at once. At one time he thought of going to Floy and Claude Caxton, her betrothed, and telling them all, but a hope that he alone could baffle the schemers and save the secret, held him back.

All at once the nabob felt the touch of a finger on his arm. As if Cora had found him, he turned with a start and looked into a face that appeared strange to him.

It was a face which placed its owner anywhere between thirty and fifty, and if the banker had been more observing since quitting Danton's door, he would have seen that the eyes before him had followed him many squares.

"You are Mr. Loris, the banker?" questioned the stranger.

"I am Lloyd Loris," was the response.

"Good! I thought so. I would like to see you a moment. We might go in here. It isn't your style, I know, but the place will serve our purpose as well as your library."

Loris was about to object, for the room designed by the man was a cheap restaurant with a tap-room on the English plan up-stairs.

"I'm interested in your affairs," continued the stranger, at the same time giving the banker a look which seemed to give his face a new expression, and Loris, without more ado, nodded and followed him.

They passed through the lower room to the end and went up-stairs. The place was small and at that moment unoccupied.

"You've been disappointed twice this afternoon," said the man. "You did not find either of them at home."

The prey of the conspiracy looked sharply at his companion. His language told that he had followed him, dogged him at least from Danton's rooms to Captain Nadir's house.

"Do I cause you to think that I've shadowed you?" laughed the stranger. "I've done nothing less, Mr. Loris. Who am I? Let me keep my identity to myself for the present, for the mention of my name might put an end to this interview before its purposes have been accomplished. I want to help you."

"Help me?" exclaimed the nabob. "How do you know that I need help?"

"When a man looks up first the best shadower in New York and not finding him crosses the city to the house of Nadir the Bengalese showman and finds neither, I think he needs a helping hand."

Loris was struck by the man's bluntness and reasoning powers.

"I'll be square with you. I want to feather my nest, but, at the same time, I want to get even with the head of the plot against you," the stranger went on. "Dan Danton and Captain Nadir have disappeared. The conspiracy has dealt a blow which has been successful. Now, nothing stands between you and the plotters. They can come and make their demands and you are helpless. They may have made them ere this," Loris gave a slight start. "They won't hold back long if they have not. I know one of the prime movers. I have seen his hand in more than one trick before this."

"Who are you?" cried the nabob.

"Never mind. You see I don't want to frighten you off," and the speaker smiled. "I'm a man who never takes both eyes from the business in hand—always keeps one on it until it has been accomplished. I can't stand between you and the League, Mr. Loris. The men who can do that are in its hands. The chances are that they have been helped out of the world, but we've got to risk that. I'm willing."

"How, willing?" queried the nabob.

His unknown companion leaned toward him and dropped his voice to a whisper.

"I think I have struck the trail," said he.

"Whose trail?"

"The League's."

"Do you mean to intimate that you can find Danton and Nadir?"

"I mean nothing less!"

"I don't know," answered Loris, doubtfully.

"You mean that you don't like to trust me?"

That was it exactly, but the millionaire banker did not like to cultivate bluntness at that time and place.

"It all lies with you," continued the man, falling back and assuming an indifferent air. "I thought from what Captain Nadir told me you would not reject assistance at this time."

The mention of the tiger-tamer seemed to turn the scale.

"I can't afford to lose this man," thought Loris.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"As I'm feathering my nest and taking some risk," was the response, "I want a guarantee of ten thousand dollars to be paid me if successful; if the League get the best of me the same sum to be paid to my child. I will follow my clew to the end. The League can be held off awhile by firmness. I know this city above and underground. I don't care so much for myself, for I'm not a very useful member of society, but I want Nell to have a start. She can do without her father better than without a start. What do you say?"

"You don't guarantee success?"

"The man who enters a den of lions is liable to get dismembered," smiled the stranger in reply. "That's the best answer I can give you."

"You may go ahead."

The man drew a small sealed envelope from his bosom and pushed it across the table to Loris.

"What is this?" asked the banker.

"Nell's address, sealed. It is not to be opened until the end of the third day from this, say, at this hour—four in the afternoon. If I don't report by that time pay the ten thousand over to Nell, for I won't need it."

The victim of the plot picked up the envelope.

"I think, though, I'll have the pleasure of collecting the amount in person," and the grin that accompanied the remark filled Loris's heart with hope.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE JAIL BIRD'S CRAWL.

THE New York nabob went back to his house to wait for the Queen of the Hidden Hands who had promised to call at eight for his reply.

He carried in his bosom the sealed letter containing the address of Nell the convict's daughter though he did not know with whom he had just bargained.

A part of the exciting drama played during the last few hours had the semblance of a dream to Loris. He knew that Therese Talcott the bane of his earlier life was alive and at the head of a game to despoil him of his wealth and ruin him in another sense. She had for a helper—he had no doubt of it now—Samson Sparks, the adventurer of other days and the man whom he thought he had killed in the duel.

These two persons could unlock the doors he had kept closed so long. They could expose the secrets he had guarded from Floy and the world and with one blow shatter all his hopes.

Loris did not place much confidence in Paul Pollen's ability to carry out his part of the bargain made in the room above the restaurant.

From what he had gathered from Paul's remarks he took him to be a man immersed in crime, and such men he knew were not to be trusted.

Again he thought he had discovered that the man was disguised, that he had seen the signs of paint on his face, as if he was afraid to come out on the street in his natural plumage. If he had known that one Paul Pollen had escaped from Sing Sing and was wanted by the police he might have thought that he had bargained with him.

The millionaire's scheme now was to put Cora off when she came until he could hear from his new trailer. His head was full of plans looking to this end while he sat in the library looking every now and then at the clock that ticked off the appointed hour.

While he is there let us go back to Paul Pollen and see what steps he took toward carrying out his contract with the bedeviled nabob.

"If I fail, why, I can keep away, and Nell will get the money anyhow," smiled the convict to himself as he watched the figure of Loris disappear up the street. "It is all in my favor. I needn't take any risk at all. The League has caught Captain Nadir and the detective and will hold 'em fast enough if no one interferes. I need not take a step forward, but then that wouldn't be fair, and I promised the tiger-tamer to help beat the conspiracy against Loris the nabob. I'm going to do my part."

If Paul had picked up a clew as he had hinted to the banker, he went to a poor place to recover it.

Not long afterward he might have been seen

watching two men who, walking leisurely through one of the numerous shaded squares of the city, were watching a well-dressed gentleman who, with plenty of time on his hands, was sauntering in no particular direction while he enjoyed his cigar.

The convict, who trusted fully in the efficacy of Dido's brush, watched the two lynxes with a good deal of curiosity, and when they followed the well-dressed gentleman away to overtake him beyond the Park and exchange a few words with him, a smile flitted across his face.

Samson Sparks was the person in good clothes, and though Paul could not get near enough to catch his words, he was satisfied that something important had passed between him and the two.

The shadows of evening were falling once more, but Paul, leaving Samson to himself, followed the two men until he could leave them in a certain resort, helping themselves in a manner that promised a long stay at the table.

He flitted from square to square like a shadow in his journey across the city. As he had told Loris, he knew New York above and underground, for twenty years of evil life had rendered him familiar with the great city.

The convict dodged into an alley at last, within a stone's throw of the river. In a moment he was lost to the sight of the street, and his feet sent out few sounds to indicate his trail.

When he stopped, he found himself at a window closely shuttered and unusually near the ground.

Paul felt along the edge of the right hand shutter and found a leather cord, which the sharpest eye could not have detected.

He jerked it and waited.

In a little while the shutters parted an inch, and the jail-bird leaned forward.

"It's me, Midge," said he, and at the end of a response of surprise from the inside, a door near the window opened just enough to admit a human being, and Paul squeezed in.

He passed into a room entirely dark, but not long after, he stood face to face with a small woman with a swarthy skin and two remarkably bright eyes.

"They'll get used to your looks by and by," said she, staring at Paul.

"That's what I want 'em to do, ha! ha!" laughed the convict. "I guess the huns' about over, Midge. I'm feathering my nest right along, anyhow."

"At the old lay?" queried the woman.

"Not yet. It would never do for me to show my old hand so soon, because we have our peculiarities, and the cops know mine. I'm here to go through the passage."

"What's up now?"

"I'm feathering my nest, I told you," explained the pickpocket. "I left the janitors of the room over their cups, and the fine gentleman passed 'em some cash to let 'em have a good time. It's ten thousand if I win and the same if I lose."

Midge, the woman, looked at the convict until a smile for her astonishment gathered at his lips.

"Who gets it if you lose?" asked she.

"Nell," was the quick answer. "But, then, I'm to keep out of his way—play dead, you see, Midge!"

The convict crossed the room while he laughed. It was a small and poorly furnished apartment. The light revealed enough to enable one to see that poverty had set its seal on everything visible, though the woman herself was rather well dressed.

"Are you sure the way is safe and the chamber empty?" she asked, following Paul, and checking him at the door he had reached.

"I am. I'll risk it, Midge," said he.

The woman lessened the light, and the convict unbolted the door.

"Shut it after me, and don't let on if anybody comes," remarked Paul, with a parting glance at the woman before he went down the short stairs visible beyond the door, to find himself in a cellar-like place, with rough stone walls, and as dark as a cavern.

He crossed the flags that formed the floor, and knelt at the foot of one of the walls.

"I don't need any matches at this end of the line," muttered the jail-bird. "I may need a spark or two at the outcome. There's plenty o' light waiting for me there, and I know where to find it."

In a few seconds Paul had removed a stone from the wall, and revealed an opening large enough to admit the body of a common-sized man.

Without ado he edged his way into the passage, and crept forward on all-fours. It was a dark and dismal journey, and one that seemed endless, but it terminated at last, and the convict, perspiring and begrimed with the dirt of the dark corridor, found himself in another cellar, which he had entered by removing several stones from the wall.

"If they have a secret dungeon, it lies beyond the hall of secrets," said the convict, following one of the dark walls with his hands. "Ah! here's the door, and I have the key ready for the lock."

Taking a key from his pocket he found a lock

in the dark, and in a moment had opened a door and stepped forward.

It was evident that Paul the convict had been there before. At any rate he knew what he was about, for he made no misstep nor went wrong in any particular.

Once beyond the door the convict felt for and found a gas-burner to which he touched a match, and in an instant he found himself in the hall of the Hidden Hands!

For a moment he looked at Queen Cora's throne, the seats along the wall, the emblems above them, and the ballot-box on the table in the middle of the room.

"I guess I haven't followed my clew for nothing," laughed Paul. "When Midge put me on to the old passage, she did not think she was helping me to anything like this, and that's why I told Lloyd Loris that I knew the city above and *underground*."

He let the gas burn until he found a door which he unlocked with the same key, then he recrossed the room and put it out.

Once more Paul Pollen found himself in the dark, but he soon struck a match and pushed down a narrow passage which terminated at a door for which he had no key.

"Have I reached the dungeons of the League?" exclaimed the pickpocket. "I thought one key would fit all their doors, but this one bailes me."

He felt in his pockets and found several little tools that were not keys.

The man was able to pick something besides pockets.

All at once a noise up the passage he had descended made him draw back from the door and suspend operations.

While he looked in that direction he saw a streak of light. It seemed to rivet him to the cold floor beneath his feet.

"My God!" mentally exclaimed the convict. "I am to be discovered!"

There was now no doubt of this, for at that instant the light was suddenly increased by the opening of a door, and the man from Sing Sing saw a figure step into the passage.

"I don't want a match to satisfy me," said a voice, the sound of which sent a thrill through the convict's frame, for despite the distance and the place he had recognized it.

The following moment the light went out, a door was heard to close, and Paul knew that he was in the dark and narrow passage with—Samson Sparks!

A nameless chill seemed to seek the convict's marrow. The Man of the League had come to satisfy himself that the tiger-tamer and Danton, the Shadow Sharp were still safe in the clutches of the cabal, and he could not do so without first encountering the spy, who had come in through the underground trail.

Paul hugged the wall and waited.

He kept pace with Samson's progress by the sounds his feet made in the dark, and when a short distance separated them, he raised his hands above his head and made ready for the struggle he knew was bound to come.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FLOOD IN THE DARK.

"If I can catch him right at the start there will be no more trouble," thought the convict, while he waited in the dark for Samson Sparks, whom he knew to be supple and very strong.

Paul was obliged to obtain an advantage over the Man of the League in order to get the best of the contest about to ensue.

The corridor was too narrow to admit of the passage of Samson's body without touching him. Then it was very dark, and Paul could not tell toward which wall the plotter would incline. There was a good deal of risk, and the jail-bird who was bent on winning Lloyd Loris's ten thousand could not afford to fritter away his chances.

It did not take Samson long to reach the end of the underground passage, where the unseen foe waited breathlessly for him.

All at once the two men collided, and before Paul could pounce upon his prey, that prey had backed out of reach, and could not be felt.

It was all done in a moment, and the briefest moment the Sing Sing felon had ever experienced.

Paul stood irresolute in the dark.

What should he do?

Samson Sparks had scented danger in the unexpected touch, and had retreated. He was somewhere in the dark, about to assume the offensive, or waiting for Paul to advance.

If the convict could have looked up the subterranean passage a short distance he would have seen the Man of the League leaning against the wall with a six-shooter cocked in his hand.

His lips were glued together, as it were, and his whole countenance, as the angels of gloom saw it, was tensely drawn and wildly anxious.

Who had he touched in the dark? Who was at the end of the passage—at the very door that opened upon the secrets of the League?

If it was one of the Hidden Hands there would be nothing to fear, but Samson Sparks was sure he had come upon an enemy—a spy, who must not be permitted to quit the place alive.

The Man of the League did not once think of Paul the convict.

For some time Samson stood touching the wall with the revolver in his hand.

He tried to determine where the other stood. He leaned forward as far as possible, and attempted to make out his location by catching his respirations, but in this he was unsuccessful, for the silence of death was his only reward.

Once or twice he raised the weapon, and thought of sending a ball in search of the person he could not see, but he gave up this idea, and lowered the revolver to his waist as before.

"Confound him! Why don't he make a move?" mentally exclaimed Samson. "This is torture of the keenest sort. It can't be that either of the dungeons is empty. No; the fellow—the spy—in the dark came hither to rescue the two; but I have blocked his game. He must have been at work on the door when he heard me. If I had not recoiled at the first touch, he might have caught me at a disadvantage."

Seconds seemed hours to the two men who faced each other in the darkness of the passage.

Neither cared to take the step which would bring on a death-struggle, for fear of putting himself at a disadvantage.

If they could have caught the remotest glimpse of one another—if they could have heard each other breathing in the dark, there would have been a speedy renewal of the introduction, but the gloom was almost palpable.

They stood in the heart of a tomb as it were, one with a revolver in his hand, the other with nothing at all in his grip, but eager to get a throat there as soon as possible.

This confrontation in the dark continued for ten minutes.

At the end of that time Samson fell back again.

He changed to the other wall, and sidled along it until he found himself at the door that led into the council-chamber of the League.

"I have him now!" thought the plotter. "I can shut him up in the passage and keep him there till help can be summoned. There is no danger of his getting out nor of rescuing the victims of the League. We shall soon see who this tiger is and where he came from!"

Samson crossed the threshold of the lodgeroom and shut the door. As he did so he shoved a bolt into a heavy socket and for the first time in a quarter of an hour took a natural breath.

He now walked over to one of the gas-burners and turned it on.

If he could have looked in a mirror at that moment he would have seen a pale face which it would have been difficult to recognize as his own.

"Now, make the best of your situation!" chuckled Samson with a glance at the door he had just bolted. "I'd give a good deal to see who I have entrapped, but a few minutes will tell the tale."

During this time the man from Sing Sing was making the best of his situation.

He was not very sorry that Samson had eluded him for, to tell the truth, he did not thirst for his blood, but he did not like the idea of being cooped up in the passage until the Man of the League could summon help enough to capture him.

When Samson retreated he had followed, but the Man of the League had beaten him to the chamber.

"By Jove! if I can't go one way very far I may be able to go another a little further," growled Paul.

He went back to the door he was working on when Samson Sparks surprised him.

He seemed to forget the man who had outwitted him.

Taking his lock-picking implements from his pockets he fell to work on the door, of course in the dark.

He found the keyhole and in went the false key.

A few twists were given and then he fell back, listening with his ear against the wall as if he had heard a noise in the direction of Samson Sparks.

When he went to work again he won the game, for the next minute he found he could open the door.

An odor of damp and mold almost overpowered him.

"Most like a grave!" exclaimed the pickpocket. "Never saw anything like this before under New York. Can't be that I've opened the wrong place, eh? No, this must be the dungeon of the League, else why was Samson Sparks coming down here when I stopped him?"

The question was unanswered save by the dampness before the convict, and it urged him on.

"Rats!" said Paul, disgustingly, a moment afterward, as numerous squeaks assailed his ears, and he heard a weird scampering in the darkness. "I'll shut the door and see what I've found."

He pushed the door to behind him, but took

care that it did not catch. Then he drew a match along the wall on his right, but a phosphorescent trail was all his effort produced.

"These walls are wet. There has been water here recently!" exclaimed the convict. "I wouldn't be surprised if they can flood this place from the river, which isn't far away."

He tried his match again, but with a repetition of the result already noted.

"I've got to see with my fingers," continued Paul, not relishing the idea.

He threw the match to the ground and pushed down the wall.

Wherever his hand touched the stones it was covered with a slimy dampness which told him that at no remote period the chamber had been flooded.

It was not a pleasant thought.

"Heavens! what was that? The door behind me? By Jove! what if he has closed it?"

The man from Sing Sing went back with a deadly fear at his heart.

"My God! I am a prisoner in this water-soaked grave!" he exclaimed, for his hand had found the door and it was as solid as a rock.

"You are right!" was the response which came from the other side of the barrier. "You are cooped up like a foolish hen, and there's no help for you, either."

Paul Pollen fell back, gnashing his teeth and cursing himself a thousand times over.

He knew that Samson Sparks had changed his tactics, that he had heard him open the door, that he had sprung down the passage probably in his stocking-feet to shut it upon him, thus burying him in a living tomb!

He would not reply.

Samson should never know whom he had caught. He would die first before he would reveal his identity to the man beyond the door although he believed that Samson would set him free if he knew the truth.

Grating a curse through his teeth, Paul the convict made no reply to Samson Sparks's ejaculation of victory.

"How do you like the change?" asked the Man of the League after a moment's silence.

No answer.

"Going to play dumb, eh?" continued Samson. "You'll have an excellent opportunity by and by. My compliments to the ghosts you were hunting when you meet them. The Archangel will open the door when he comes. And you'll be where you are to meet him!"

The voice died away with a dismal echo and amid the silence that followed Paul heard a slight noise like the sound of receding footsteps.

He stood for a moment longer without speaking, as if he waited for Samson to get beyond reach of his voice.

"What are ten thousand dollars to this?" said he. "I might have made that sum in the old profession and feathered Nell's nest and mine without the risks I took for his money. It won't be Samson's fault if the Archangel doesn't find me here when he visits Gotham. I don't want to stay here that long. I don't intend to if I can help it."

He soon discovered that the tools which had let him in would not let him out and he fell back with a growl of despair.

Once more he felt his way down the damp wall, the chill of which penetrated to his heart.

Suddenly he stopped and listened. He could do this if he could not see, for the damp dungeon was as dark as the passage he had just left.

All at once the noises of rats ceased as suddenly as they had first pierced his ears.

"Water! My God! they are flooding this place again!" burst from the convict's throat.

He could hear the rush of water from some point apparently straight ahead, but he could not see the torrent.

"I want to see how they do it," he went on.

"If the walls won't give me light my matchbox will."

The following moment he broke the crown of one of his lucifers and leaned eagerly forward.

Already the glittering element was spreading over the floor at his feet. It seemed to make rapid headway.

With the match in his hand the man from Sing Sing rushed forward through the water. He saw it pouring through the wall in a tide as thick as his arm and from three places.

The sight drove every vestige of color from Paul Pollen's face; Dido's brush could not have rendered it whiter.

A minute's look seemed to derive him of every hope.

"He knows what to do!" cried he, throwing the match at his feet. "He can pay the money over to Nell!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

NELLY'S MOTHER.

"Where's Paul?"

The little old man to whom this question was addressed looked up from his chair and shook his head.

"When will he come in?" pursued his visitor. Another shake of the same head.

"Don't he leave any word for me?"

"None."

"Do you think he left any with Dido?"

"You can ask her."

The old man's questioner, who was Samson Sparks, left the little room at the end of the shop and went forward to the Cerberus of the establishment who sat in her accustomed corner eying every one who passed or entered.

Samson began with the same question with which he had assailed Anak.

Dido was as much in the dark concerning Paul's movements as was her master, and a shake of her head was the answer Samson received.

"Mummy and Sphinx!" growled the Man of the League, and getting a grin from Dido in reply, he bounded from the shop and mingled with the people on the sidewalk.

"Can it be that he is the rat in the trap?" suddenly exclaimed Samson. "No! that is impossible. There is a spy we knew nothing about, and fortune has thrown him into our hands. Paul has gone back to his old calling or taken to tracking the tiger-tamer again—a fruitless mission, as he will learn in time. Cora was to have kept her engagement with our party at eight. That hour has passed. I can go up and wait for her."

It was an hour after the scenes of the last chapter, and Samson Sparks who, ignorant of the identity of the man he had consigned to a living death in the dungeons of the League, had just been to old Anak's in search of the convict, started up-town to hear Cora's report of her mission to the nabob's house.

On the way up he turned aside long enough to hover for a few minutes about Nell's abode in hopes of encountering the jail-bird, but the door of the alley home did not open to let him out, neither did the door he had shut on the convict with his own hand.

As Samson was turning away he caught sight of Nell beyond the window and before he could quit the vicinity the girl was upon him.

"Heigho, Nelly," exclaimed the Man of the League, putting on an unruffled countenance. "I was just looking about for him, you know," he lowered his voice; "but as you were alone and I did not want to disturb you I thought I'd go off quietly."

"Not so quietly but that I've caught you," smiled the girl. "You don't come often."

"No. In the first place, I don't want the police to think I know he's out by coming here too often. I'm his friend, you know, Nelly."

"Yes, he has told me that," replied the girl.

"I'm glad he's out," continued Samson. "Now, if he keeps straight and bides awhile longer till the cops have ceased to look for him all will be well."

"He'll do that if he listens to me."

"And to me," added the Man of the League.

"Are you in a hurry?" queried the convict's daughter.

He did not want to show too much haste, and so he replied:

"I'm not in a rush, Nell. Is it anything you want, my child?"

"Come in," was the response.

Samson Sparks followed the girl into the house.

He did not know that upon a former occasion she had followed him from that very house to the abode of Nadir Bali, that she had heard the growls of the tigers while they assaulted him, nor that she knew that he was in the desperate plot to rob and ruin Lloyd Loris and his child.

"I want to show you something," resumed Nelly Pollen, when she had Samson in the house. "I found it to-day in an out-of-the-way place with a lot of other things which father must have secreted a long while ago."

While she spoke she unwrapped a small packet, which caught the plotter's eye from the first.

"Is that my mother?" asked Nelly, handing him a daguerreotype.

Samson Sparks gave a quick start.

"Do you think it is, Nell?" he asked, with a smile.

"I asked you," was the quick response. "It must be my mother, else why would father have hidden it?"

"He may have found it," said Samson.

"I know what you mean," cried the girl, flushing with indignation. "You mean to say that he found it in somebody's pocket. I won't believe it. You hold in your hand my mother's picture. Your looks tell me as much."

"This is her portrait," answered Samson. "It was taken when she was young."

"Before I was born," suggested Nelly.

"Before you were born," echoed the Man of the League.

"Why should father keep it from me all this time? What wrong did my mother do to have her face kept from her child all these years?"

"No wrong, Nell."

"Then, why didn't I know of the existence of this picture?"

Samson shook his head in astonishment.

"Paul Pollen always was an odd quantity," said he. "A very odd one."

Nelly took the picture from his hand and studied the face several minutes in attentive silence.

"What was with the picture?" asked Samson.

"You said you found a lot of things with it."

"So I did. There were old letters, a bit of a dress, and other articles in the same parcel."

"Were the letters addressed to your mother?"

"They seemed to be."

"By whom?"

"Not by father," replied the girl.

"That is queer," mused the Man of the League, aloud.

"I can't show you the letters," continued Nelly, with an air of mystery. "The picture is enough for you to see. My mother's letters, now that I know how she looked—she is very beautiful, don't you think?—are sacred things."

"Why withhold them from one whom you know to be a friend?" asked Samson.

"Do I know that?"

He drew back and looked at her.

At that moment there came back to Nelly all she had discovered about this man. If he could enter a house at night with a naked knife lying along his sleeve, if he could league with the cunning and beautiful woman who had tried to coax her from home, he was not to be trusted very far in other matters.

"Don't think hard of me," resumed the girl. "I can't show the letters I found with the picture. They are strange missives, like some a father might write to his child; but I must not judge them. I cannot."

Samson Sparks saw that the girl was determined and did not push his lines any further.

"What do you know about my mother?" pursued Nelly.

"I, child?"

"Yes."

"What makes you suspect that I know anything?"

"You knew the picture the moment you saw it," answered Nelly.

"Well?"

"You knew my mother at the time of her marriage. Who was she?"

He did not speak.

"I can't make you tell," said the girl with a show of spirit as she stepped back, a bright light in her eyes. "You cannot make me believe by your silence that she was not a lady. It may not have been her fault that she wedded a man who violates the law—one who has heard the grating of prison doors. My mother has no stigma attached to her name that she brought to it herself. If you don't want to tell me the truth, I will find the secret on other lips."

Samson saw her restore the portrait to the coverings from which she had taken it. He watched the proceedings with covetous eyes and when she had completed the operation in triumph he looked up and encountered her gaze.

"Will you ask your father when he comes?" he asked.

"About my mother?"

"Yes."

"I will ask him," she answered firmly.

"And show him the letters found with the picture?"

"Why not?"

The cheeks of the Man of the League seemed to lose color.

"If he will tell you, all right," smiled Samson picking up his hat, and without giving the mystified girl another chance to interrogate him he walked from the alley home.

"Not back to Cora's now," said he to himself. "She can wait awhile for me. The report will keep. I want to find Paul. I must say a few words before Nelly confronts him with her find. This episode turns me aside from the main hunt, but it belongs to it just the same. The girl is shrewd; she may go back to the letters and get something out of them. They tell me she has a lover—a sharp young newspaper reporter, always on the lookout for sensations. What if she calls him in? By Jove! Paul must come home. He must get his fingers on the old letters. I thought they were destroyed long ago. Nell thought they were written by a father to his child. This shows how quick-witted the girl is. Now, where is Paul the jail-bird?"

If he had but known the truth, would he not have gone back to the dungeons of the League? Would he not have unlocked the doors he had closed behind the man in the underground trap, and with a match in his hand have called the name now so often on his tongue?

Samson Sparks went back to old Anak's shop. His journey proved fruitless, for the jail-bird had not returned, and after a brief interview with Anak and Dido, with whom he left a message for Paul should he come, he went off again.

Half an hour later he was checked on the street by a voice which dropped into his ears like a sudden clap of thunder.

"What do you think makes the tigers so quiet now?" were the words Samson heard. "They were mad enough this morning."

"I don't know why they are quiet," was the reply.

"Maybe Nadir has come back?"

"Nobody has seen him if he has. There was said to have been a light in the house late last night, and in the upper room where the beasts are kept, but I can't find the man who saw it."

At this time Samson ventured to look at the speakers who had accidentally crossed his path, and he saw two men he did not know.

"My head to a dollar that Captain Nadir

hasn't come back to his beasts," laughed the Man of the League. "I presume the tigers are quiet because some maddened citizen has thrown some poison to them. I know something about Nadir myself, gentlemen," he was still watching the two, "and you need not concern yourself over his absence. Death has divorced him from his striped pets. The hand that holds the trumps is the hand of the League."

Once more Samson started off, with his eyes on the lookout for Paul the convict, but one of the men whom he had noticed had turned about and was keeping close to him, although he did not appear to be playing shadower.

Still, wherever Samson went, up one street and down another, the man went also, and when the Man of the League disappeared beyond Cora Catlin's door, the shadow stopped and turned back.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A BOLD FRONT.

THE Queen of the Hidden Hands received Samson Sparks with a face considerably flushed. Her eyes had a feverish sparkle, and the Man of the League could see by her mien that something had gone wrong.

"He is showing fight!" was Cora's exclamation, by which Samson was greeted when he entered her presence.

Samson's hopes dropped in disappointment.

"I have just come home," continued Cora. "The hour appointed for the interview was eight. I was promptly on hand, and when I entered the library Lloyd Loris was expecting me. I thought I detected signs of resistance in his hearing, but, of course, I did not betray myself."

"What did he say?" asked Samson, eagerly.

"I am coming to that. I did not mince matters, but at once renewed my proposition. He was told in so many words that he could choose between marrying me and exposure. He did not turn pale as before. To my surprise he looked at me and laughed. 'Floy does not want a new mother,' said he. 'The memory of the one is embalmed in her heart.'

"If the ceiling had fallen at that moment, I should not have been more surprised. His unlooked-for coolness staggered me for a second, but I did not let his words deter me. I think I speedily put on a countenance as cool as his. I leaned forward and laid my finger on his arm; he shrank back at the touch.

"If you declare war, Lloyd Loris, I accept," said I. "If you want your child to know that no record of her mother's marriage exists, that her father fought a disreputable duel, that he has recoiled these many years from the grinning skeleton of his past, you can open the campaign. If you want New York to see the mask drawn aside, and to stand at the bar of public opinion as a man with two lives, all you have to do is to reject my proposition."

"He heard me through, with his lips quivering now and then, but terribly determined."

"Madam," answered he, "if that be your ultimatum, it is war."

"Gods!" ejaculated Samson, "I did not expect this."

"The campaign won't last long," replied Cora, smiling. "The first move we make will bring the nabob to his senses. When I had heard him through I left my chair, and went toward the door. 'The fight is on,' said I, looking at him. 'There will be no quarter shown, as far as we are concerned, and none will be asked. Good-night, Lloyd Loris.' I left him in his chair, as white as his shroud will be some day. Indeed, despite his pretended coolness, he looked terribly disturbed, and more like a dead than a living man. I fancied that he wanted to intercept me, but I did not give him the opportunity. I was gone before he could quit his chair, but managed to drop my card in the hall. He won't fight long," finished Cora. "He has lost his allies. It may take him a little time to find this out, then he will surrender at discretion."

"What caused this spurt of resistance?" inquired Samson.

"His haughty spirit, for one thing," was the quick response. "Then he trusts in the man who is his paid shadow. He does not know that the doors of the League have closed forever on Danton the shadow, and Captain Nadir, the tiger-tamer. When he knows this he will not dare fight us. It will tell him that the League is all-powerful. Now, what do you know?"

The query brought back to Samson's mind his adventure in the underground passage attached to and leading from the chamber of the Hidden Hands.

"I have just sealed the fate of a spy," said he.

Cora answered first by a quick start.

"How, a spy?" she exclaimed.

"I found him in the dark way, leading to the sealed portals."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know. I was not permitted to see his face, for I had to fight him in the dark."

"Did you kill him?"

"I left him to the water."

"In the stone dungeons?"

"Yes."

"I would like to know his identity, but never

mind," said Cora. "We ought to be satisfied with the result. You flooded the dungeon, did you?"

"I gave him all the water he will ever want," smiled Samson. "The door I shut behind him will never respond to another key. The spy has found his fate beneath the houses of Gotham, and his fate, like that of the detective's and his ally, will never be known. This is better than trusting to this hand and that. Paul Pollen can hunt his enemy now, and pay him when found for sending him up the river to wear stripes. I have been looking for Paul."

"Why would you see him?"

"I want him to block a little game. The girl is getting along too fast."

"Nelly!"

"Nelly."

"How too fast?"

"She has found a picture of her mother."

"Well!"

"And with it a number of letters."

"Where are they?" asked Cora.

"In her possession."

"Did you see them?"

"I did not. She showed me the picture."

"It was her mother?"

"Yes."

The Queen of the League did not speak for several moments.

"Would you have the convict to take the letters from the girl?"

"If not that, to explain them in a way that would throw Nelly upon another scent."

"I see!" exclaimed Cora. "But why get the jail-bird to play such a hand? The loss of the letters would prove sufficient."

"You are right, but—"

"A risk, eh?" laughed the woman.

"A slight one," said Samson.

"It is best to take it," continued Cora. "You know the house pretty well. Is the girl ever away at night?"

"Not often. She sometimes goes down to the newspaper office where her lover is."

"Oh, a lover, eh?" laughed Cora. "They don't care much for stigmas nowadays. She must go down there to-night. Perhaps what you told her about the picture will induce her to make the journey."

"I don't know," admitted Samson.

"It were worth trying at any rate."

"Shall I undertake the job?"

"Yes."

"I am to take nothing but the letters, I presume."

"Nothing more."

Ten minutes later, two persons quitted Cora's house and walked away together.

Some distance from the place they parted, one keeping on down-town, the other going toward the Hudson on the other side of the city.

Let us follow the last named.

Cora Catlin kept on with rapid strides square after square.

She did not intrust her face to the lights of the cars, and this is why she kept to the pavement, flitting under the lamps, and jostling hundreds in her eager flight somewhere.

She did not go down to the abode of Madam Amelie, the fortune-telling fraud, but seemed to keep as far from the house as possible.

"Ho! out again, my prison-bird!" exclaimed a man, who caught sight of Cora's face and stopped in astonishment. "I thought we'd meet again, and I think I told you so when I saw you last. You didn't take to Reddy the Rogue when he tumbled out of No. 209 Q— street and knocked you across the gutter. You have more freedom in New York than you used to have in Paris, especially when Nadir was taming the tigress of Saint Lazare. Ho! ho! you walk fast like you used to do. You haven't lost much beauty since then. By Jupiter! I believe you've gained a little. What's your game now? I'd like to see your 'hand' just for a moment. Wonder if I can't get a glimpse of it if I follow?" And the big man whose introduction to Cora on a former occasion we have witnessed, followed her with a quick stealthiness that seemed foreign to his nature.

Cora knew nothing of this.

She had forgotten Cad Castile or Reddy the Rogue, and was thinking of more important matters while she hurried along. If she had suspected that she was followed, she would have eluded or turned on the shadow at her heels.

The Queen of the League who was playing for two millions, was cool and desperate enough for anything. Samson Sparks might fail to execute the commands of the tribunal, but she would not.

For some time Cora had the persistent shadow of Reddy the Rogue in her wake.

She led him from one street to another as if she knew he was about and was trying to baffle him.

Suddenly there stepped to the Rogue's side with a quick sharp cry a woman at sight of whom Castile grinned and attempted to push on; but a hand held him back.

"I'll lose her, Midge!" exclaimed he. "There may be a cool stake in the play for Reddy."

"Never mind her," was the answer and the woman called Midge glanced after Cora who

had disappeared already. "I think I have something better for you, Reddy."

"Where is it?"

"At my house. Come."

"I don't know," said the rascal doubtfully. "You women never set the proper value on things. But I've lost my lady now and may as well follow you."

Cad Castile was guided to a certain door in a little alley-like street close by.

He was next conducted through the house to a cellar whose somberness was somewhat relieved by the lamp the woman carried.

"That passage leads to a secret which may line our pockets with gold," said Midge pointing to a dark opening in the wall. "It has proved, I fear, the death of one man who ventured."

"And you want it to finish me?" cried Castile falling back.

"No, Cad," answered the woman. "I want a man to help me to the secret beyond the passage. There shall be but two shares to it—yours and mine. At the end of the tunnel you will find a dark place and a door. Beyond the door is a large room which is the secret meeting place of the Hidden Hands. What does it mean? It is an order of some kind, at the head of which is a beautiful woman with sloe-black eyes. I've seen her myself sitting on her throne, but I never ventured back for a second look."

"But the man who went forward and has not returned? What of him?" queried the Rogue.

"That is what I want to know," was the answer.

"The League is not in session now. A man can go further than a woman. He is stronger and there may be doors to force in order to get at the secrets."

"A masked queen and a secret League? By Jove! I'll take the chances."

Reddy the Rogue divested himself of his coat and forced his body into the opening. It was close work, but he persisted, and in a little while he was crawling through the tunnel, while the woman left behind listened with a smile of triumph.

In less than ten minutes the Rogue was out of the dark sweat-box, and while he was panting over his efforts he caught the glimmer of a light and the sound of a footprint.

"I've crawled into a trap, I guess!" he mentally exclaimed, but a moment afterward a door opened on his right and he saw in the light of a gas-jet the figure of the woman he had tracked on the streets—Cora, the Queen of the Hidden Hands!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TRAP AND TRIGGER.

"THE Queen of the Mystic Order, but not masked now!" passed through Castile's mind when the apparition of Cora appeared. "Lost on the streets, found underground. I guess I have a new hold on the tigress of Saint Lazare, and she'll have to line Reddy's pockets with yellow before he lets her off this time."

The door was closed almost as quickly as Cora had opened it, but the crook did not hear the noise of a bolt and rightly surmised that none had worked.

The Queen of the League had evidently changed her mind, for Reddy the Rogue, fortunately as yet undiscovered, slipped forward and saw her cross the chamber of the tribunal, and open another door on the opposite side.

She did not turn the light off but left it burning when she disappeared, and with the quickness of a cat the rascal entered the hall of the League and followed.

Cora had gone down a dark passage unrelieved anywhere save at the threshold of the chamber where the light of the gas-jet fell. The sharp eyes of Cad Castile had already lost sight of her, but he could hear the sounds of her footsteps.

"The woman is at work," he said to himself. "I hear her at a door. The key is not working to her satisfaction. Gods! she seems to be coming back!"

In an instant the Rogue drew back and then bounded across the chamber to the door through which he had entered.

"I shut the door and it has locked itself!" exclaimed he. "I'm in a trap of my own setting, and the woman will find me in a moment."

In a moment?

The words were hardly off his tongue when a sudden cry had made him turn and he found himself face to face with Cora!

The Queen of the League stood in the doorway leading to the dark passage with the whitest face he had ever seen above a woman's shoulders.

Her expression was one of horror and rage and the black eyes that flashed above her cheeks seemed to pierce him through.

"Who are you?" demanded Cora, finding her tongue, but speaking in tones not her own.

"You ought to know," answered the Rogue, starting toward her.

"My God! I recollect!" said the woman of the plot seemed to recoil from Castile before he was half across the room.

"I thought you wouldn't forget me," grinned the man. "I told you that probably we'd meet again, and here we are!"

Cora had recovered composure to a certain extent. At any rate she stood proudly erect before Reddy, the Rogue, and her eyes had now a cold glitter of triumph.

"You have tracked me!" said she. "You are one of those men who live by their wits! and those wits are never honest, nor scrupulous."

He affected to laugh but something—was it her face?—made him desist.

"You threatened me when we parted last," continued Cora, "but I did not think much of it. I should have known, though, that a man of your reputation will stoop to anything."

"I didn't expect to find you here, but one place is as good as another," replied Castile.

He took a step nearer her as he finished.

"You are close enough," said Cora with a gesture of remonstrance.

"Am I, eh? You didn't used to be so particular. When you were one of the belles of St. Lazare, you primped and powdered to please scoundrels who came to see their sweethearts."

Cora's whole face crimsoned.

"That is enough. Go back to yon door!"

She pointed across the room looking him in the eye at the same time.

Reddy the Rogue did not move.

"Retire to the door!" repeated Cora.

"You can't drive me out that way. The door is locked."

"Never mind that. I shall not repeat the demand."

The Rogue tried to divine the full meaning of the command, but failed, and sullenly moved backward.

Cora seemed pleased to note the distance increasing between them.

Reddy the Rogue, with his match found, drew up alongside the door and looked across the chamber at the woman.

The next instant Cora's right hand rose from her side, and the rascal saw in it that which had not caught his eye before—the polished barrel of a revolver.

"Cad Castile—you see I have not forgotten your name—I am going to kill you!" said Cora, with a deliberateness that was torture. "You cannot go back from here with the knowledge you have obtained. We don't want any more in the brotherhood; if we did, you would be the last person to be admitted. The spy of to-day deserves the same fate that overtook the spy of centuries ago. You have crossed forbidden ground. The threshold behind you is your deadline. In a minute your soul will be with its Maker!"

The man who heard these words had set his teeth hard, and was looking at the speaker with the face of a stoic.

He might have been calculating the possibilities of a bound across the room straight at the uplifted revolver. There was a chance that such action would break the fatality of Cora's aim, but he would be more likely to fall dead half-way across the space.

"Are you ready?" came from Cora's lips.

"Do you really mean to kill me?"

"I do!"

There was no response, only the burly figure that touched the door seemed to hug it a little closer, and the lips of the plotter's victim appeared to sink into each other.

The six-shooter, which had been aimed at his head, suddenly dropped and covered his heart.

Cora was not going to take chances of missing when she knew that a bullet through the heart meant more than one through the head. The skull sometimes turns a bullet, the heart never.

"I shall count three, giving you a moment for a last prayer," continued the cool woman.

"Don't withhold your fire on that account," was the answer.

Cora's lip curled with derision.

"As you live, you die, eh?" she smiled. "Here we go, Cad Castile, alias Reddy the Rogue, thief, and Heaven knows what else. One—two—three!"

At the last numeral the body of the cornered spy went forward as if at the last desperate moment he had resolved to take the chances of a bold dash, but the next instant the room was filled with the noise of a report, sharp and death-like.

The figure of the big spy stopped and stood still for the tenth of a second, then it tottered back toward the door, and while the smile grew sharper at Cora's mouth it fell to the floor with a thud and quivered but once and for a moment on the stones.

The murderer did not quit her place, but looked at her work with the smoking weapon in her hand. Her face had no color, her lips had fallen apart and the steely glitter had come back to her orbs.

"Thus perish all spies of whatever name!" she exclaimed. "I wonder how he got here, but I will not investigate it now. I can go back to the door and see what is beyond it. I may take the dead to keep company with the dead. The water has gone down ere this and I am strong enough to bring Cad Castile down the passage."

The Queen of the League was once more in the corridor at the end of which was the door at which Reddy the Rogue had heard her at work.

She resuined her attempts to open the portal but the lock resisted every effort.

"Why open it?" she suddenly exclaimed, drawing back and desisting. "I know the secret held by the dungeons beyond the doors. I wanted to see the face of the spy Samson shut in here, but the water has not spared it, and I would not know the bloated carcass. One by one they quit the trail. Now let Lloyd Loris show fight. He is in the grip of the Hidden Hands. His sleuth-bound is dead, the tigertamer, the shadow's ally occupies the same coffin with him, the spy shut in by Samson has finished his career and I have just brushed another secret-sifter aside. We are at the threshold of triumph. All we have to do now is to turn the knob and enter."

Cora struck the door with her clinched hand, and called out in glee:

"Good-by, spies! The hand held by the League is full of trumps! The trumps of death!"

Her words had a weird echo in that dark place, and the last one was echoing still when she turned away.

The following minute she re-entered the chamber of the League, and looked at the body of her last victim.

It lay where it had fallen, and the light threw its grotesque shadow a short distance across the floor.

Cora went forward and unlocked the door behind the Rogue, then, turning off the light, she passed from the room, leaving the darkness that succeeded to hide the work of her revolver.

There was no one to follow her from the underground corridors to the streets above; but at the end of the tunnel—in the Midge's cellar—a woman who had heard a pistol-shot was listening with all her might.

"Are you sure you heard a shot?" asked a man who listened with her.

"Of course I am," replied the Midge. "If you go into the tunnel and never come back, remember it won't be my fault."

The man laughed.

"But I'll come back!" was the response. "The traps of the League don't hold all they catch."

And the speaker handed his coat to the woman, who took it without a reply.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ROBBED.

MEANTIME Cora, the Queen of the League, had gone home, not followed this time by the noiseless footsteps of Reddy the Rogue.

"They will find him where I left him," said Cora to herself, when she thought of the man she had left behind in the underground chamber of the Order. "One by one the spies fall into the trap, and quit the game. When Samson comes I will have something new to tell him!"

She had hardly entered her own house, ere the clear tones of the bell summoned her to the door.

"Ah, you were not far behind me!" exclaimed the plotter, at sight of the man who stood on the steps.

It was Samson Sparks.

A melancholy smile seemed to illumine the rascal's face, but it soon disappeared.

He said nothing until he had walked into the parlor where he turned upon Cora and spoke four words:

"I have been robbed!"

For a second he was confronted by a face more than half inclined to break into a smile, but the seriousness of his own countenance was enough alarm the woman before him.

"What have you lost?" asked Cora.

"More than we can afford to lose if the property taken should fall into certain hands," was the reply.

In an instant the Queen of the League seemed to divine the true state of affairs.

"I thought you had destroyed the papers," and her look grew stern enough to make Samson lose color.

"I intended to do so this week. I would have consigned them to the fire to-night if I had found them in the trunk."

"Tell me all," answered Cora. "Between us we may find a clew."

Samson first helped himself to a glass of golden sherry which he found on Cora's center table and then settled back into the chair he had taken.

"I went to my quarters first," he resumed. "I wanted something there before I raided Nelly's house. When I turned on the gas one look was sufficient. I saw at once that a common thief had entered the house and plundered my room. The dressing-stand had been ransacked and one-half of the trunk's contents lay on the floor in confusion. Of course my first thought was of the papers. I hoped that they had escaped the rascal's eye, but I was soon undeceived. The leather pocketbook that held them along with some other documents must have attracted the thief, and he probably took it without once looking inside. At any rate he carried off the pocketbook and its contents which can never be of any value to him since

they did not consist of money. A common house-plunderer generally buries or throws away that which, while it cannot enrich him, is liable to get him into trouble."

"What else was taken?" calmly asked Cora.

"A few dollars and a bit of jewelry."

"Have you a clew of any kind?"

Samson smiled.

"I have none," said he.

"What makes you think a common thief did the business?"

"The state of the room showed that. Your sleek thief, the man with dainty fingers, don't plunder like a coarse brigand. He would have looked into the pocketbook and seeing no bills there would have thrown it down, but the book itself caught the rascal's eye, and into his bosom it went. I'd like to track him down and choke him!"

"The chances are that you will not do either," smiled Cora, and then her face suddenly grew serious.

"It is best to burn some things; you know that now," said she.

"Confound it, yes," was the reply.

"You could have destroyed the record in England."

"Yes."

"Or have dropped it into the ocean. You had a thousand chances."

"So I had," he growled, "but I wanted you to see it."

"I would have accepted your report without a question."

"What do you think?" he exclaimed. "Do you believe that the papers have passed into our victim's hands? Does Lloyd Loris show fight because he expected to hold those stolen secrets?"

Cora did not reply.

"You don't answer me," Samson Sparks went on. "The nabob has not had time to employ a new sleuth-hound. He does not know that Danton and Nadir Bali are in the grip of the dungeon. He still relies on them. It seems to me that the man who invaded my premises has no connection with the man on the avenue. I still maintain that he was a common thief, working on his own hook."

"If the papers should reach Lloyd Loris he will gather strength for the final tussle."

It was marvelous how coolly the Queen of the League talked under the circumstances.

"But I say he knows nothing of the robbery," cried Samson. "He doesn't know who took the records from the little parish church in England, therefore, he would not know where to look for them. He might suspect you since you have told him that no record of his marriage with Floy's mother exists, but the man who took the papers from my trunk did not attempt to plunder you."

"No," said Cora. "He went to the right place, as if he knew that you had not destroyed them."

"By heavens! I wish the thief was with Danton and his companions!" exclaimed Samson.

The next moment the Queen of the League gave a quick start and took out her watch.

"I will go back to him," said she.

"Back to whom?"

"To the man I left in the hall of the tribunal."

"When did you leave a man there?"

"Less than two hours ago."

"Who is he?"

"Reddy the Rogue."

Samson Sparks looked puzzled.

"You don't know him by that name, I see," continued Cora.

"I do not."

"His other name is Cad Castile."

"I knew a man by that name once, but it was not in this country."

"No, in Paris. Fate threw him across my path a short time ago. To-night he followed me. I found him in the chamber of the League. How he got there I do not know, and I did not stop to inquire. I knew that he was playing spy, that, with the pertinacity of a bloodhound, he was dogging my footsteps, for he knew me when they had me in Saint Lazare, and he took delight in confronting me with this knowledge. The man was a bloodsucker, a blackmailer. He wanted to get a new hold on me, and that is why I found him to-night in the secret room."

"Well? You say you left him there?"

"I did. I killed the spy without mercy!"

"Just what I would have done!" cried Samson. "There is no telling how much he knew."

"I was going to say so. The man who plundered you may have tracked me, for there is no doubt that Cad Castile knew you in Paris as well as he knew me."

"And finding both of us here, watched us both, eh?"

"Yes."

"By Jove! there may be something in that."

"Enough, I think, to send us back to the chamber."

"When?"

"Now, of course."

"He is still there?"

"The dead never run away!"

It did not take Samson Sparks long to announce that he was ready to go down to the

hall of the League and search the body lying there in the dark. It was more than possible that Cora's victim was the thief who had plundered his room, for as Cora had argued if he knew her he knew him, and seeing both in New York would be not naturally suspect that a shrewd plot of some kind was on foot, and fall to watching them for a chance to enrich himself?

If the papers stolen from his room should fall into the nabob's hands the game for his millions would get a sudden if not a fatal back-set.

They consisted in part of the record of his marriage to his wife now dead. The hands that had plundered the little church of Petersham in the north of England had been particular to take the proofs of that marriage; they had carried them across the sea to land them by the city of Moscow in New York and thus furnish the League with a new and powerful weapon with which to crush Lloyd Loris and bend him to its will.

Samson Sparks had a new mission when he quitted Cora Catlin's house a few seconds after her remark that "the dead never run away."

He was once more on the streets flitting from square to square and thinking of the events of the last few hours.

"The chances are that Cora's suspicions are correct," said he to himself as he neared the meeting-place of the League. "I am almost sure that I will find the missing papers in the bosom of the man she shot under the gas-jet. If she had searched him herself she might have been astonished. Let me get my hands on them again and they'll crumble to ashes on the spot. No risks next time."

Samson reached the private entrance to the building beneath which the League for gold held its hidden sessions. He was sure no one had tracked him, for he had taken every precaution, which he was sure Cora had not done, else Cad Castile would never have confronted her in the chamber.

In a little while he unlocked the door, advanced a step in the dark and halted.

He was in the headquarters of the mystic Order.

A strange and almost ominous silence pervaded the cimmerian room.

Samson knew where to find the body, for Cora had told him where she had left it.

When he recovered his nerve, which had fallen a little by his surroundings, he went forward and found the gas-burner.

He could almost see the body of Reddy the Rogue in the darkness.

Presently he struck a light, and held it over the burner.

The flame leaped up with a spurt, illuminating the whole room, and Samson cast his eyes upon the stone floor.

But why did he stare so, like a man suddenly confronted by the horrible? Why did he fall back with an exclamation of surprise?

There was nothing on the cold flags at Samson's feet.

Cora's victim was gone!

CHAPTER XXX.

DIDO'S BRUSH STILL AT WORK.

"In Heaven's name, where is Cad Castile?" cried the Man of the League, still staring wildly at the stones. "He was here when she left, dead!—killed by her own hand. She would not quit him with a spark of life in his body. Here's another mystery, and one which has left no clew behind."

For some time Samson continued to confront the inexplicable, then he went to the door, at the foot of which Cora's prey had fallen at the crack of her revolver. It was locked.

"Can it be that a member of the League, finding him, have dragged him away?" he went on. "If this be true, he may be keeping Danton company," and he crossed the room to the door leading to the dark corridor, down which he went to the portal of the secret dungeon.

Samson had not visited the place since he had closed the door on Paul Pollen, the convict.

He struck a light at the door, and held it near the floor, but there were no stains of blood on the stones. Then he tried to open the door, but the same unknown causes that had baffled Cora baffled him.

He worked at the lock awhile, and then desisted.

The Man of the League was puzzled by this new state of affairs.

In ten minutes he left off his work as suddenly as he had begun it.

"It is too much for a head as much worked up as mine is. I'll go back. Cora is cooler. There are no secrets among the men of the League. We will soon know who found the body and took it away."

Once more he stood on the pavement of Gotham.

If he had known that a man had crawled through the tunnel leading from the Midge's cellar to the hall of the tribunal he might have choked some valuable information from this woman who knew the criminal fraternity of New York, besides being a person who sometimes sold her secrets to the bloodhounds of justice.

Samson Sparks was not lucky enough to know the woman. If he had, it is doubtful whether he could have got possession of her last secret, for when she had sold to one she did not bargain with another.

"Shall I go back to Cora with the news, or shall I try to get hold of the letters which Nell discovered with her mother's picture?" mused Samson as he walked along. "I'm a man with my hands pretty full just now. I might run over to old Anak's and find out whether Paul has come back. I could make use of the jailbird, for he could help me to the documents. I'll look for him a moment first."

Not long afterward the figure of Samson Sparks passed Dido at the door of the shop, and went back to the old man's room.

Old Anak grinned and shook his head the moment he saw Samson.

"Not back yet," said he. "I'm afraid the cops have found the escaped pigeon."

"No, no!" exclaimed Samson. "Paul is too sharp for that. Besides, Dido's brush always fools the hounds."

"Always! ha, ha, ha!"

The laugh sounded so shrilly at Samson's shoulder that he turned with a start and looked into Dido's face.

The face artist of old Anak's shop looked hideous when she laughed; to Samson she was disgusting, more so than ever before as she confronted him with arms akimbo and her dumpy figure thrown back against the door.

"I'll bid you good-night," said Samson, addressing the pair and stepping back at the same time.

Dido made a sign to Anak which Samson did not see.

At the same time the face artist moved to the right and halted directly in front of the Man of the League.

There she stood like a statue, with her eyes half shut, though with a sparkle of triumph between the lids. Samson Sparks looked at her with an expression of mystification.

"What does the ogress mean?" he thought.

"They are looking for you—for you, ha, ha!" suddenly continued Dido.

Samson seemed to fall back a step.

"For me!" he echoed.

"For you, my child," repeated Dido.

The Man of the League turned and looked at old Anak.

"What does she mean?" he exclaimed.

"Dido is no fool," was the retort. "Dido knows more than how to paint faces. Dido picks up lots of secrets without leaving her seat in the corner."

"But what is she getting at now? She says they are looking for me. Who are 'they'?"

"Dido can tell."

All this time the she-Cerberus of the shop was leering at Samson from the depths of her curious eyes and when he turned to her from Anak's last reply he found her in the same position in which he had left her.

"Why, you ought to know who 'they' are," laughed Dido.

"I don't want riddles," cried Samson irritated by the woman's manners. "You want pay for the information you pretend to have, eh? Well, go ahead."

A quick look passed from Dido to Anak.

"You want your face touched up," grinned the woman.

"My face?"

"Why not? They never recognize anybody who passes under Dido's brush. Wait! I'll get my colors. No, Anak will hand them to me."

The old man moved across the little room and soon came back with a dirty flat box and several brushes.

"I don't want to change my skin," said Samson with a gesture of remonstrance.

"You must," answered Dido coolly selecting a brush from the lot. "Place him in the chair, Anak."

"By heavens! this is too much!" cried the Man of the League. "Tell me what you know and let me be the judge of the danger."

"Sit down," retorted Dido waving him toward a chair. "The new face first; the secret afterward."

Biting his lip nearly through, Samson complied and looked up at the ogress from the rickety chair near the door.

The next moment Dido fell to work being watched by old Anak who grinned all the time like a delighted imp. Samson had never before been under the woman's brush. He had seen its work on the convict's features, and knew something about its wonderful transforming qualities, but never expected to feel it gliding over his skin, making wrinkles where there were none, and changing the color of his eyebrows.

For ten minutes Dido worked with the zeal and enthusiasm of a true artist. Now and then she would step off and inspect her labor, much to Samson's disgust. It was a severe trial for his patience, but the task was completed at last, and both Anak and Dido pronounced it a splendid piece of transformation.

When a mirror, with one clean spot in the center, was handed to Samson Sparks, he could hardly repress a laugh of derision and wonder.

He hardly knew himself. There was an excellent bit of court-plaster in paint over one eye, and he looked ten years older, though Dido had not altered his good looks.

She had given his brows a less shaggy appearance, and had entirely painted out the crescent-shaped scar under his left eye.

"How do you like it?" asked Dido.

"It'll do," said Samson, curtly. "Now, tell me why you've gone to all this trouble? Who are looking for me?"

"They who want you," was the reply.

"Want me? What for?"

Dido laughed.

"That's a pretty question, I think. You ought to know."

Samson's patience was exhausted.

"Come! the truth, or the lie you've been making up!" cried he. "This is a slick way getting at one's pocketbook. You don't know anything. What do you charge for giving a man a new face against his will?"

"You'll be willing to pay a good deal tomorrow."

"Fudge! Does she know anything, Anak?"

"Ask her," was the tantalizing response.

"Not a word!" flashed Samson. "She is either crazy or a fool. I'll wash my face before her infernal colors are dry. Then—"

Dido's big hand grasped his own before he could more than look at the basin in one corner of the room.

"They didn't come here at the same time, but I know that they are working together," said she, sinking her voice to a whisper as she leaned toward Samson. "I know all the sleuth-hounds of New York. I see them from my chair in the corner, and some of them I have painted, not because I like them, but for their money. They—the two—came here looking for you."

"How do you know for me?"

"Dido is no fool," put in Old Anak again, before the woman could respond.

"Where is the man who was left in the dark?" she grinned.

In spite of his composure, the Man of the League almost jerked loose from Dido's grip.

"What do you know?" he exclaimed.

"Why don't you make your trap strong enough to hold all the rats it catches," the ogress went on.

"My trap?"

"Your trap!"

"I don't catch rats."

Dido looked at Old Anak and burst into another laugh.

"You can flood it when you care to, can't you?" she said. "You can drown the vermin in the dark, but are you sure they are there when you turn the water on?"

Samson's face was colorless.

He no longer thought that Dido, the face-artist, knew no secrets. She seemed proud of her knowledge, and Anak was looking on with a hideous grin expressive of intense delight.

"The rats want you," continued Dido. "They are looking for the man who helped them to the trap that caught them. That is why I painted you."

"My God!" cried the Man of the League. "You don't mean that the trap is empty!"

"Would the rats be hunting you if it held them fast?"

Samson Sparks drew back and stood for a moment before the curious pair, irresolute.

A thousand wild thoughts surged through his mind.

It was an awful secret which Dido had divulged. He could not think of it without feeling a nameless chill creep along his bones.

"When were they here?" he queried.

"When?" said Dido, looking at Anak.

"Not over an hour ago."

Before Samson could reply, the face-artist stepped before him, brush in hand.

"I can improve the patch over the eye," said she. "You won't resist now, eh?"

The man of the League submitted without a growl and Dido worked a moment and drew off with a smile.

"You're proof against them now!" she laughed. "They won't see you under Dido's colors. How much? Give it to Anak."

Samson drew his purse and handed the old man a roll of bills which no one took the trouble to count, then he said "good night" to both and walked toward the street.

"Out of the trap alive?" he muttered. "My God! this seems impossible. They were pinned to the wall in the dark. It must be a lie invented by the fertile brain of the she Cerberus back there; but how could she know anything of the trap? ah! that is the part that mystifies me."

CHAPTER XXXI.

BACK IN THE TIGERS' DEN.

THE Man of the League walked rapidly from old Anak's shop, as if he wanted to quit the vicinity as soon as possible.

He did not feel entirely easy under the disguise he had been forced to assume, but he could not get a better one at the time and was therefore obliged to put up with the only one at his command.

He thought once of going back to the secret

chamber and forcing the door he had failed to open, but he soon dismissed this idea, resolving, however, to return to the place in a short time.

Not long afterward Samson found himself opposite the house occupied when he visited it last by the three tigers belonging to Nadir Bali.

He had not forgotten the conversation accidentally overheard to the effect that the beasts had become strangely quiet of late, and that by some it was thought that their master had returned.

"I don't hear them over there," murmured Samson looking at the building sheltered by the three trees on the sidewalk. "It is dark, too, as if the place was entirely deserted. If Captain Nadir had escaped from the trap he would not forget his pets. He would come hither the first thing and somebody would be likely to see him."

He watched the somber house a few moments longer and then crossing the street a short distance below it, approached it with his senses keenly on the alert.

In front of the tiger-tamer's abode he slackened his gait and surveyed every window with intense curiosity. Not a sound came out to startle him.

"The den is empty," said Samson to himself. "Somebody has poisoned the tigers, which is why they are so quiet, and Nadir is where we left him. The once overseer of Saint Lazare has quitted the game, and Therese need not fear the hand he intended to play."

The next moment he was almost jostled by a man who came from Samson knew not where, as he found the stranger at his elbow when he turned from his inspection of the house.

"They're dead, I guess," grinned the man, nodding toward the house.

"The tigers, you mean?" answered Samson.

"Nadir's cats. I haven't heard 'em since yesterday, and I'm compelled to pass here pretty often."

The speaker was not disposed to linger, but the Man of the League had not had enough of him.

The two walked away together.

"What is the story about Nadir having come home?" queried Samson. "I've heard that a light has been seen in the house—"

"Somebody after tiger-skins, I guess," interrupted the stranger, who was a stoutly-built man of forty, rather good-looking, and inclined to take a humorous view of affairs. "I've thought of investigating the mystery, but I lack the time, and that fact always put me off. They're dead enough, though. I'll warrant that—dead, and coatless, too!"

Samson Sparks seemed to believe that his companion spoke with a positiveness that guarded a little secret of his own. In the strangers' mind there was no doubt of the tigers' death.

"They made a good deal of noise after Captain Nadir's disappearance," said the Man of the League.

"Set the neighborhood wild for a spell," was the response. "But all at once the growls ceased—all at once, mind you—between two days. I don't pretend to know what stilled the giant cats, but I've an idea. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poison?" suggested Samson.

"Who told you?" exclaimed the man, looking him in the eye.

"No one."

"That's my idea exactly. You see it was suggested on the streets. What was easier? A piece of loaded meat could have been got to the cats without the least trouble, and between you and I, they got a dose which their master would not have given them for the world. It's all nonsense, too, the talk about Nadir having come back, though I suspect a light has been seen in the house."

"When was it seen?" asked Samson.

"Last night, some say."

"What have you seen?"

The man gave the member of the League a queer look.

"What say you?" he suddenly exclaimed. "I am about as curious as you are. Just now I have some time on my hands. Let us go back and privately solve this question of Captain Nadir and his tigers."

Samson felt a thrill dart to his heart.

"I'm nobody but Mart Mox—a queer name, though where I come from, the south of England, the Moxes were a large and respectable family. I live three squares back, and that is why I know something about Nadir and his pets. Shall we investigate?"

"Yes, I'd as lief do it as not," rejoined Samson, and the two men turned back.

As they walked toward the house, recollections of his former visit came rushing through Samson's brain.

He saw again the three tigers on the stairs, found himself shut up in the parlor with only a door between himself and a terrible death; in short, he lived over in a few seconds the awful experience of that night of adventure.

Mart Mox guided him to the rear of the house, and Samson found himself beneath the very window by which he had escaped from the teeth of the tigers.

The small yard behind the house was full of

shadows, but the Englishman found the shutters and opened them without noise.

It did not take long to raise the window, and a moment later the two men stood near the sill listening intently, while they looked into each other's faces.

The very silence of death pervaded the darkness beyond the window.

"Dead and skinned, but we'll go on and see," whispered Samson's companion. "I guess I know the way."

"Ah!" thought Samson. "You have been here before. Ten chances to one that you know where the tiger cats are, my friend!"

Mart Mox was the first to scale the sill. He was an agile fellow, and Samson saw him drop into the house with the cleverness of a cat.

The Man of the League followed without a moment's hesitation, and Mox, taking his hand in the darkness, led him forward, saying in a whisper:

"Dead tigers can't hear, you know. By Jove! I should say not, ha, ha!"

They crossed the floor, the keen eyes of the Englishman finding a door as easily as if he had plenty of light to guide him.

"Mart Mox has been here before to-night," mused Samson, going back to the same idea he had but lately relinquished. "He will show me the carcasses of the tigers that wanted to feast on me. Such a discovery will prove Dido a deceiver and settle the question of Captain Nadir's fate."

"We're in the captain's parlor and no tigers yet," laughed a voice at Samson's ear. "The curtains are drawn here and no slats are missing. I'll strike a match."

The following moment a light dissipated the gloom and the Man of the League looked from Mart Mox's face around the room, seeing here and there certain bits of furniture which he had seen before.

"What do you think, eh?" smiled his comrade.

"I see no tigers yet," answered Samson. The match fell to the floor and darkness again took possession of the room.

Samson Sparks mounted the stair with Mox at his side.

"They used to play on these steps," said a voice. "Boys who used to look through the keyhole of the front door say that the three striped cats cut high jinks where we are."

The Man of the League did not reply.

"To find the tigers dead would settle the story about Captain Nadir's coming back—don't you think so?" continued the Englishman.

"Undoubtedly."

"He wouldn't let the beasts suffer, you know."

"What do you think about the tiger-tamer's going away?"

Samson nearly stopped when he put the question.

"I think he didn't intend to desert his pets. He's a queer fellow, they say. If he was an American, one might know what to expect; but these dark-skinned foreigners are puzzles."

"Yes," said Samson. "Only an accident would keep Nadir from his cats."

"That's just what I think," said Mart Mox. "Every man has an enemy. Why not a Ben-galese?"

By this time the two men had reached the top of the stair.

"He kept his pets at the end of the hall," continued Mox. "The cages are down there. We can go back to the watch again; indeed, we could turn on the gas without fear, but we won't do that."

A minute afterward Samson Sparks saw the walls of the corridor which they had reached. He even noticed the long marks of tiger-claws on the plastering.

"Here are the cages!" remarked Mart Mox stooping as he shoved his match forward. "They are of iron, you see, strong enough to hold the cats of Asia. I don't see any tigers, though, do you?"

Samson shook his head and smiled.

"Maybe they're in here," the Englishman went on, turning to a door at his right, but the darting hand of the Man of the League found his wrist and held him back.

"They may be alive," he whispered. "Don't let us go too rapidly."

"Pish!" laughed the guide. "Do you think I'd come this far if I thought for a moment that there was life in one of Captain Nadir's pets? There ain't a live tiger in the house."

He touched the knob as he finished and turned it.

As the door opened he threw his match to the floor and crossed the threshold.

"No tigers here you see," his voice said in the dark.

There was no response, for Samson Sparks stood like a statue in the doorway, his tongue glued to the roof of his mouth and a chill in his very marrow.

Something soft had brushed his leg. It felt like the touch of an animal gliding by, and a terrible thought had deprived the Man of the League of every power to stir.

He had been betrayed by Mart Mox and there were tigers in the room.

All at once a match snapped and flashed. It blinded Samson Sparks for a second and in that time he heard a voice that seemed to seal his doom.

"That is the man! He was to be known by the patch which Dido's brush put above his eye!"

As these words entered Samson's mind, he recoiled with a gasp, but a hand drew him forward, the door was shut, and he stood face to face with Danton and the tiger-tamer!

CHAPTER XXXII.

FLOY AND THE SERPENT.

THE thousand and one clocks of New York were designating the completion of a certain hour when Lloyd Loris the hounded nabob was startled by the sound of his door-bell.

He had been immersed in some papers on his library table to such an extent that he had not heard the carriage which had stopped in front of his house, and he went out into the hall with some pallor in his cheeks and lips compressed.

Had Cora the evil genius of his life come back, and was the League to get a new grip, one that would drag him down despite the fight he was making for his child's sake?

When he opened the door a feminish figure sprung forward with a joyful cry and Loris staggered back holding Floy to his breast.

His child had come home without orders, and at the very moment when he would have given half his wealth to have had her kept away.

"I could not remain from you another hour!" exclaimed the pale but beautiful girl whom the nabob assisted to the library.

He looked at her like a man in a maze.

It seemed to him that Floy had found her way to the secret, that she knew the double life he had lived before her, and that it had blighted hers irretrievably.

But when he looked at her in the warm light of the lamp his heart took courage.

"The dream brought me home," continued Floy. "It may have been very foolish for me to come, but I could not stay."

"The dream! Was that all?" smiled Loris. "I thought you were taught, my child—"

"Not to believe in dreams!" broke in Floy, laughing lightly. "We forget our teaching sometimes in the strange things that come from the supernatural. It came to me twice last night. I was in a beautiful garden littered with flowers of the most exquisite hues. They were everywhere, but in the center on a gentle hillock grew a rose whose wonderful beauty I cannot describe. Whichever way I looked I was drawn back by some mystic power to that one flower. It fascinated me as the serpent fascinates the dove."

"At last I went forward with the intention of possessing myself of it. I reached the raised flower-bed and bent over to pluck the rose. Just then I saw something dazzling on the ground at the foot of the bush and in a moment I was looking into the eyes of a serpent."

"My God!" exclaimed the millionaire as if the story his daughter was relating had been taken from real life.

"I saw the serpent in the dream as plainly as though I were in a real garden," continued Floy. "It looked at me with its fascinating orbs and I felt myself being drawn closer and closer with no power to resist. I was in the most deadly of thralls. All at once the rose seemed to change. It became strangely human in appearance and finally became a face which I recognized with a cry that broke the spell. It was my own face that I saw on the bush—a photograph could not have been a better counterpart of it!"

"With the vanishment of the startling dream I felt a singular exhaustion pervade my frame. I struggled for strength, but seemed to struggle in vain and at last sunk into a deep slumber. All at once I stood again in the same garden of flowers. I saw the rose on the center mound, and again I was irresistibly drawn toward it, but ignorant it seemed of the serpent there. Once more impelled by a desire to possess the flower I put forth my hand to pluck it when I rediscovered the serpent, and broke the spell as before on seeing the rose transformed into my own face!"

During this recital Lloyd Loris watched his child with an interest which no pen can describe.

He knew that a serpent had coiled itself about the flower of his heart, that Theresa Talcott's eyes were the ones which had fascinated Floy in the dream, and more than ever before he felt himself in the clutches of the League.

"Such is the dream that has brought me home," resumed Floy. "Do not send me away any more. Let me be near you. If the serpent comes coiling about the flower as I saw it in the garden let me help you kill it; but it may never come."

What could Loris say?

"Where is Claude?" he asked at last in husky tones.

"I do not know."

"When did you see him last?"

"Yesterday."

"And he knows nothing about the dreams?"

"Nothing."

The New York banker seemed to commune with himself for a moment.

"What do you think of my strange adventure?" Floy suddenly asked.

He started.

What a splendid time it was for him to tell her all! They were alone. The very servants had gone away for the day and she had found him the sole occupant of the house.

"In a moment. Wait till I come back," said he, and she watched him as he left the library, going out into the hall and then up the broad stairs until she could no longer bear him.

She did not see him enter a little room with but one window which was closely shuttered. He closed the door behind him and unlocked an iron safe in one corner.

From the depths of the safe he took a packet which he hid in his bosom after which he retraced his steps re-entering the library to be greeted by Floy with a look which told how anxiously she had waited for his return.

"I am ready to talk now," began Loris in tones not at all like his natural ones. "The dream that has brought you home is more than a mere vision of the night."

"What?" cried Floy. "Is there a real serpent?"

"There is," was the reply. "A good many years ago, when I—"

He caught the sudden departure of the last bit of color from his child's face and paused.

"If it pains you to tell me anything to-night keep it back," said she, laying her hand on his arm. "I can wait."

She had waited too long already.

At that moment the silver tones of the bell seemed to send an electric thrill through the nabob's every nerve.

"I will answer it," exclaimed Floy, springing up and disappearing before he could restrain her.

Loris heard her in the hall for a moment and then the sound of the door as it opened.

"My father does not wish to be disturbed to-night," he heard his daughter say.

"He will see me though," was the answer in a voice at which Lloyd Loris bounded up and then with a gasp clutched the table for support.

"The serpent has coiled about the rose again!" he exclaimed. "My God! what are my sleuthhounds doing that they do not come between me and that creature?"

At the same time he heard Floy's voice again.

"He will not see you," said the young girl, resolutely.

"Will not? I can blight your life by the lifting of my finger! Stand aside and let me see the man who calls you child."

Loris felt his heart stand still in his breast. He knew that Floy and the merciless Queen of the League were face to face.

Suddenly the door before him was flung open and his daughter sprung into the room.

Her eyes had a flash he had never seen in them until that time. The crisis in her life seemed to have imbued her with a strength foreign to her nature, and when she drew her faultless figure to its true height and looked toward the door she had left open he thanked heaven that his blood was in her veins.

"Yonder stands the serpent I saw beneath the rose-bush!" cried Floy, covering with outstretched hand the beautiful creature who had halted in the doorway, and who was none other than Cora, the woman of the conspiracy. "The eyes are the same, the glitter has not left them, but they have lost their power of fascination so far as I am concerned. Father, I ask you in the name of Heaven, who is that woman?"

The Gotham nabob, watched by the glittering orbs of Therese made several ineffectual efforts to speak. His tongue refused to perform its office. His grip on the table tightened and with it his look grew ghastly.

"He knows me!" suddenly rung out the voice of the woman in the door. "When he tells you who I am let him tell the truth which he has kept from you all your life. I am the holder of a secret which, if told, would make you shrink from that man with a shudder. I have offered to compromise on a peace basis; but he has laughed at the proposition. More than this, he has set human bloodhounds at my heels, hoping to destroy the proofs of the past before they should reach you. Who am I, did you ask him? Rather seek to know what you are yourself!"

For a moment longer Floy Loris occupied the floor, pallid but determined, then, as if she felt the last arrow sink into her heart, she staggered back with a gasping cry and fell like one dead across the carpet and in the lamplight!

"Witch, this is your work!" cried the nabob, moving toward Cora with clinched hands. "I'll set all the bounds of New York after you! I'll unmask the branded creature of Saint Lazarus—"

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" broke in the Queen of the League, with a triumphant laugh. "You will accept my proposition before tomorrow night, or the life you have lived before you fair girl will crumble like a house of cards. I tell you plainly that the League you hate holds all the trumps!" And then the nabob was alone with his child.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE TERRIBLE GUARD.

SAMSON SPARKS was thunderstruck when as Mart Mox's match blazed up in the little room in the tiger-tamer's house he found himself confronted by Nadir and Danton.

He knew in an instant that the trap had not held them, that they had escaped by some means in time to avoid the water which had been turned on for the purpose of putting an end to their careers.

He also saw that Mart Mox, whoever he was, had betrayed him into the power of the enemies of the League, and his first thought was one of vengeance.

Mart Mox seeing the mad light that flashed up suddenly in Samson's eyes, stepped nimbly aside, and in another moment the Man of the League was alone with Nadir and Danton.

"Do you want to see the cats?" asked the tiger-tamer, a smile accompanying the question.

"No!" growled Samson.

"You don't want to renew acquaintance? Very well. We will not press it now."

By this time the gas had been turned on, and the prisoner could study the triumphant faces before him.

He wondered if they would give him a clew to their miraculous escape, but as they did not mention it he resolved not to ask about it.

"How goes the game now?" suddenly queried Danton.

"What game?"

The two men laughed.

"Does a little episode like this disturb your memory?" continued the detective. "The game—there is but one—means, of course, the play for the Loris millions."

Samson made no answer.

"Wait," said Captain Nadir, going to the door. "I will call my family."

The Man of the League watched him until he touched the latch, when he halted him with a sharp cry.

"Keep your tigers out! I've had enough of them already!" he exclaimed.

"I would think so," smiled Nadir, looking at him, but not quitting the door. "I am sure they would recognize you, and recall the time you escaped from them in this very house. Now, will you answer us?"

"What do you want to know?"

"How goes the game?"

It was the same question, and Samson seemed to halt between answering and the tigers.

"I don't know much about it," he finally said.

"Nothing, and at the head of the plot?" cried Danton. "Let me talk for a moment."

"Go on."

"About six months ago, a man whose name was down on a certain passenger list as Oriel Otway, left New York for the Old World. He appeared in the north of England under that same name. Just what he wanted no one knew, but some people there have since found out. A few days ago, the City of Moscow brought to this city one Duke Dillon, who, slipping from the vessel by night, went direct to the house of a woman called Cora Catlin. She received him with demonstrations of delight, because he was expected, had been anxiously looked for, and all that. Is this true, Samson Sparks?"

"You think so. Isn't that enough?"

"Ha! ha!" laughed Nadir at Danton's expense. "He is as shrewd now as when I knew him in Paris."

In a flash the Man of the League fixed his eyes on the tiger-tamer.

"When did you know me in Paris?" he exclaimed.

"When you were carrying on your clever forgeries and living by your wits. I saw them brand you."

The face of Samson Sparks grew crimson.

"It is between your shoulders now," continued Captain Nadir, covering him with his finger. "You know it is there—a mark which you must carry to your grave. A good many of us don't wear the same coat all the time. You have changed pretty often, and I get tired of one garment. For instance, the world knows me as Nadir the Bengalese, when I was born under American skies, though much of my life has been spent abroad. In Paris I was Monsieur Twistem, so-called because I disciplined the refractory occupants of the French prisons. More than once I have curbed the fiery spirit of the woman called Cora now. Then she was 'Number 99,' at Saint Lazare, and pretty enough to insinuate the most cautious. I never forget 'my children,' as I used to call them. Aha! Samson, you have not forgotten Monsieur Twistem."

The countenance of the prisoner showed he had not, but he continued to look at Captain Nadir, and made no reply.

"Shall I go on?" proceeded the tiger-tamer, with a lurking smile at his lips.

"Just as you like," said Samson.

"You played a sleek game after the duel you fought with Lloyd Loris in the Park," continued Nadir. "Unfortunately for him, he did not run you through at the right place. He knew nothing about surgery. A little knowledge of it would have guided his blade to the left."

When they branded you I saw the two marks of that wound, though I knew before that the grave in the dark corner of the little cemetery held no body. It was a clever deception, Samson. When you came back from the galleys, you found 'Number 99' just released from prison. The two liberated birds breathed the air of freedom once more. By that time, however, I had become Nadir, the tiger-tamer, and one day I saw both of you looking down at me from your seats in the circus.

"It took a good many years for you to spread the net that was to catch the golden bird in New York. You flitted from one part of the world to another; you saw the American banker make one fortune after another. More than once you wanted to throw the snare, but Therese held you back, saying 'Not yet. The more years, the more spoil.' And so you waited. I have waited, too. I have tamed tigers and kept an eye on the woman who once in the prison of Saint Lazare crept upon me with a knife, and would have driven it to my heart but for her tell-tale shadow on the stone walls. You have underground traps, a secret chamber where your League meets and plots. Your queen occupies an elegant mansion, and is known as a handsome woman, without social blemish. She kills when she finds any one in her way; she is a destroying angel, who at this hour may be showing the nabob of New York that the League holds him and his in its relentless grasp. My friend here just missed her knife by being absent from his quarters. She killed the first person who came out, and learned afterward that it was a member of the League."

Samson Sparks started a little, but not with great surprise.

"Having listened to Captain Nadir," said Danton, addressing the prisoner, "there remains nothing for you to do but to go back to your character of Oriel Otway, and hand over the stolen records of the parish church of Petersham."

The Man of the League lost the bit of color that had come back since his capture.

"I have no such papers!" cried he.

"What?" exclaimed Danton. "You took them?"

"But I have been robbed."

"A thief plundered!" laughed the detective.

"I have been plundered."

"When?"

"I cannot say."

"You had the records?"

"Yes," snapped Samson.

"You cut them out of the parish book in the little chapel?"

No answer.

"You intended by this means to destroy the only existing proof of the marriage of Floy's mother to Lloyd Loris, the banker. By George! it was a shrewd game! Who suggested that play—the Queen of the Hidden Hands?"

The prisoner's lips seemed to meet with more firmness than ever, and, as before, there was no reply.

"Why didn't you destroy the records?" continued Danton. "Don't you know that such things are not safe in the hands of a New York thief?"

"I had my reasons for keeping them," said Samson, as his lips fell apart.

"No doubt. Therese wanted to see them, eh?"

"I thought so."

"She might not have believed the branded rogue of the galleys."

Samson flushed and quivered; the well-earned epithet had pierced like an arrow.

"Now," finished Danton, looking at the tiger-tamer, "you may summon the guard."

Captain Nadir left the room, leaving Samson and the Shadow Sharp alone.

The door, which was closed, was not locked, and when the footsteps of the showman had died away, a wild thought flashed through Samson's mind.

He measured the detective from head to foot with a lightning glance. They seemed to be equally matched, and Samson knew his own powers while those of the enemy were an uncertain quantity.

He let too many seconds slip by.

Once he was about to throw himself upon Danton and make a quick, resistless fight for freedom. Once out of the room he could fight his way to the end of the hall where there was a window. He was armed with a revolver with which he could meet Nadir should that worthy encounter him in the corridor. For the nonce he did not take the tigers into consideration.

A man in such a situation sometimes procrastinates to his own advantage and Samson thought so when about the time he would have gained the door if he had vanquished Danton it opened and Nadir reappeared.

The coming back of the tiger-tamer disarranged the prisoner's plans.

As Nadir stepped into the room he was followed by an immense tigress whose mouth was muzzled. She was a perfect specimen of her kind and despite her bulk had a step as soft as a cat's.

Samson involuntarily fell back at sight of the beast. He had seen the fiery eyeballs on a for-

mer occasion; he seemed familiar with every stripe.

Nadir stepped forward and extended his hand.

"Knife and pistol if you please," he said to Samson with a bow.

The Man of the League fairly winced.

As there was no help for it he drew his weapons and handed them to the showman.

"This is your room-mate and guard; this is Nina," continued the tiger-tamer, waving his hand toward the beast whose eyes had not left Samson for a moment.

"This is devilish!" cried the prisoner.

"It is only a checkmate in the game," smiled the detective. "You and Nina will get along famously if you keep your temper. She can't eat you up, Mr. Sparks, but, as you see, we haven't muzzled her claws!"

The man between wall and tigress did not reply, and with the shutting of a door and the click of a lock he found himself in the custody of the strangest jailer he had ever had.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DESPERATION.

The Man of the League did not move for some time.

Nina, the tigress, crouched in the center of the room, put her head between her supple fore limbs, and watched him closely.

"Unless I can get away from this place very soon, the detective will carry out the boast he made in Cora's parlor when we pounced upon him—three of us. He said then that in the end he would hold the trumps. By heavens! it begins to look that way now. But the game is not lost if I can elude this she-jailer, and leave this den. The League is more than a match for Danton and his friend. Cora needs only to be warned to get a new hand, and one that will give us victory and vengeance!"

It was the old reasoning that a game is not out until it has been played out, but the striped obstacle in Samson's path threatened to destroy the hopes he had raised by his self-communings.

Nina did not seem disposed to give him much liberty.

At last to test her he went to the door. Looking over his shoulder as he executed the movement, he saw the head move and the eyes follow him.

"I'd like to shatter your skull with a bullet, and I would do so if they had not taken good care to rob me!" cried Samson, glaring at the tigress.

Nina's eyes seemed to gleam with triumph, seeing which the prisoner bent forward and hissed:

"When my time comes I'll bring your career to a close. Your master will feel the iron hand of the League before he dies, and the skin you wear now will adorn something besides your back."

When Samson walked to the one window of the room, the tigress got up and followed.

Across the window ran strong bars of iron, which the strength of a giant could not break, and Samson inspected them without trying them with his hands.

After awhile, he leaned against the wall, and fell to watching the tigress. It was all he could do, for escape was impossible, though he formed and dismissed a hundred plans looking to that one purpose.

In the mean time, other events connected with our story were occurring elsewhere.

On the other side of the city, in a house which we have visited before, a man was holding over the flame of a gas-burner one piece of paper after another.

His face was ghastly in the light and his salivous hands shook as he burned the papers.

Lloyd Loris, the prey of the League, seemed to have grown ten years older in the last hour.

The table at his right held two piles of papers one of which he was steadily reducing by fire.

The dark ashes that fluttered to the floor had formed a little heap at his feet. This was increased as the minutes flew by.

Cora of the League had come and gone, leaving Floy his child in a swoon on the floor and himself in a condition of mind bordering on insanity.

At that moment Floy was up-stairs in a deep sleep, thanks to opiates administered by his own mad hands, and he had nobody to interrupt him at his work of destruction.

The striking of the clock behind him startled the hounded nabob.

He looked back and noted the hour.

It was eleven.

At the same time he reached the last paper of the pile he had been reducing.

Holding it in the flame until the last vestige fell from his fingers to join the ashes of its late companions on the floor, Loris sprung from his chair and put the remaining papers in a desk which he locked.

"I can do it all in an hour," said he, "and the potion will keep her in its power longer than that. I did promise Danton that I would not submit, but the crisis has come. I am in the grip of the League. Twice to-night the story—the confession, was on my tongue, but one look

into my child's innocent face deterred me. I can pay them their price and then guard the secret the remainder of my days. I'll bind her with an oath which, heartless as she is, she dare not break. I can't fight the Hidden Hands successfully. With Therese at the head of it the plot is bound to win. If I had the missing records of the English marriage, I could tell Floy the rest and defy the conspiracy, but they have taken that and I dare not let my child suspect that she is nameless."

By this time he was in the hall. For a few seconds he listened up the stairs but no sound came down to unnerve him for the task he had set before him.

Five minutes afterward the millionaire prey of the conspiracy was far from his house hurrying along, keeping in the shadows of the houses like a person afraid to be seen.

He did not trust himself to the lights of the streets. His face was known everywhere, and if he had permitted himself to be seen more than one person would have stopped and stared.

A half-hour's creeping from one street to another brought Loris in front of a large house, whose number he observed on the transom with a start.

It was the home of the Queen of the League, and the fly had come to the web.

It was late for a visit of any kind, but the banker's face told that business of the utmost importance had brought him to the spot.

He searched the vicinity with a quick look ere he mounted the steps, and in a second he had sent the clear tones of the bell throughout the house.

A short time elapsed before he received a reply, then steps approached the door from within, and when it was opened he recognized the face of the pest of his life.

In a moment Loris stood in the hall, and it was Cora who had fallen back with a face full of astonishment.

"Where is your parlor?" asked the nabob. "A woman with a guilty conscience needs a good deal of sleep, and I won't detain you."

"No compliment!" answered the woman, showing her teeth, while at the same time she led the way to the sumptuous room near at hand, closely followed by the nabob, whose eyes had the glitter of a tiger's when driven to the wall.

"What do you want?" asked Loris, when Cora turned on him in the light of the drawing-room. "I am here to end the whole business."

She seemed to catch her breath, and Loris saw the look of victory that suddenly flushed her face.

"I can't say that I exactly understand you," rejoined Cora.

"A woman who has played the game you have, ought to know the meaning of my inquiry; 'What do you want?'"

She drew off a step and looked at him.

"I have made my proposition," said she slowly. "Give your child a mother and the secret is safe."

Lloyd Loris was seen to bite his nether lip at this, but he did not break out in a storm of objections as Cora evidently expected.

"When do you want the ceremony performed?" he asked, with a coolness that showed the full measure of his desperation.

"I will give you time, but I must have a pledge in black and white."

He seemed to have expected this.

"Get me pen and ink," he replied.

With another look at him the Queen of the League produced writing materials and placed them on the table in the center of the room.

The next moment Loris was writing with a rapidity which did not betray the agitation that secretly controlled him, and Cora, standing aloof, watched him with an intensity that resembled the guardianship being held at that hour over Samson Sparks.

"There!" suddenly exclaimed the nabob, leaning back and pushing the paper toward her. "Is that reward enough for your infernal plottings?"

She made no reply but picked up the document, the ink upon which glittered yet, and read:

"I, Lloyd Loris, solemnly promise to marry Cora Catlin at any time designated by her."

"LLOYD LORIS."

There was no waste of words in the writing. It covered everything in the woman's estimation, and she bowed her thanks while she folded the paper.

The Gotham millionaire gave her triumphant face another look and stepped back.

"I name to-morrow night," said Cora. "The hour nine o'clock, the place this room."

There was no answer.

Lloyd Loris looking at her still backed into the hall, where he turned on his heel and without a parting salute of any kind save the flashing of his eyes, opened the door himself and rushed out into the night.

"She brought me to it at last!" he exclaimed. "But for the child at home, I would have killed the witch of Paris beneath her own roof."

He went back to the house he had left some time before.

Letting himself in, he entered the library, only to stop on the first foot of carpet, and greet with an exclamation of surprise the man he found seated under the gas.

"We have one of the hounds under our hands!" exclaimed the man in the room, who was Danton, the Shadow Sharp. "One more blow shatters the League."

Lloyd Loris seemed to stagger forward. He reached his chair, and said in tones that thrilled and startled the detective:

"It is too late! I have come to the League's terms."

"No!" was the answer. "I won't stand any thing of the kind. Though you have married her, I shall go on and play this dark game out!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

CORA AND THE UNKNOWN.

FLUSHED with triumph, the Queen of the League stood like a statue in her drawing-room until she heard the door close behind the desperate nabob.

The paper in her hand was proof enough that she had played the game to a conclusion, for, with such a document in her possession, Lloyd Loris dared not retrace his steps, nor set another detective like Danton on the trail.

Therese, as we may call her, knew nothing of the events we have just witnessed in another part of the city. "She did not dream that the only "rat" held by the "trap" at that time was Paul Pollen, the convict whose hideous corpse lay on the damp floor of the lately-flooded dungeon of the League.

Of course it never occurred to her that Samson Sparks had been cleverly entrapped by a man who had followed him from old Anak's shop, that this spy had witnessed Dido's last piece of face-painting, and that the patch had been put over Samson's eye for the purpose of rendering his identity a certainty in the eyes of Captain Nadir and the Shadow Sharp.

While Samson watched and inwardly cursed his tiger guard, and while Loris was dodging from shadow to shadow on his way home, she looked at the tangible evidence of the victory she had won.

"Samson must see this!" she exclaimed, bidding the paper in her bosom. "If he will not come to me I will hunt him up."

A few minutes later she was on the steps that led to Samson's abode. As Duke Dillon, he was known to the other occupants of the house as a quiet man, who interfered with no one's business. He had rooms to himself on the second floor, and as the front door below was never locked, Therese, who had been there before, had no difficulty in reaching the place.

She found Samson's door locked, but having been provided with a key, she opened it and walked in.

An uninhabited room greeted her.

"Not at home!" smiled the Queen of the League, looking round upon the emptiness. "There is now no trail for him save the one leading to the letters which Nelly Pollen found with her mother's portrait, and it need not have taken him all this time to secure them. Shall I wait for him?"

She answered the question by turning the gas nearly out and taking a chair. Her burning desire to acquaint Samson with her success held her in the room. To quit the place might be to miss him. She could afford to wait awhile.

While she sat in the silent room with the gas-jet no larger than a lady's nail, she thought of the thief who had robbed Samson of the important papers which he had brought from the little chapel in the north of England.

"We are winning without them!" said Therese to herself. "The mere threat was enough. He knows the record is missing, and suspects that it has fallen into the hands of the League. First the detective, then the tiger-tamer, and after them the spy whom Samson found in the tribunal hall, and the man I finished there. The game has been a succession of victories for us, though we fought for every one."

After awhile Therese heard the chimes of a clock somewhere in the neighborhood. It struck but once, and then came a stillness that seemed deeper than before.

What kept Samson Sparks from the woman who waited for him?

All at once Therese heard a key in the lock. She looked toward the door just visible in the dim light and watched it intently.

Samson was coming at last.

As the door swung open and the figure of a man crossed the threshold Therese almost sprung from her chair. Her eyes were keen enough to tell her that the new-comer was not the Man of the League unless he had donned a mask for some purpose.

He stopped a few feet from the door and Therese saw that the black cloth concealed his face so effectually that she could make out nothing.

As yet he had not seen her, but when he should turn the light on, discovery would be immediate.

She watched him like a hawk, one thrilling thought after another chasing each other through her mind.

She was sure that the thief who had robbed the room before had come back.

What if he had come to restore the stolen papers? But she could not look for such good fortune.

Seconds were minutes of suspense and torture to the breathless woman in the chair. She dreaded to see the man advance toward the light. A single twist of his wrist and she would be seen!

The man in the mask stepped forward with a suddenness that almost parted Therese's lips with a cry.

An instant later he turned on the light, flooding the room with a brightness that dazzled the woman.

At the same time he seemed to see her in the chair.

A slight exclamation of surprise stirred the folds of the cloth. It brought Therese to her feet, and at the same time the burglar came forward with a single stride.

"Good-morning, madam," said he, and at the same time Therese saw his sparkling eyes. "You were waiting—for me, eh?"

"No, not for you," answered the Queen of the Hidden Hands.

"I am the unexpected caller. Will you sit down while I go to work?"

His very coolness alarmed Therese, who saw that she was dealing with no ordinary man.

"Your work is that of a burglar," said she.

"Do you think so?"

"Your mask tells me that."

"Ho! it is somewhat suggestive," he replied, with a low laugh.

"You have been here before."

Therese was becoming bolder.

"I, madam?"

"You."

"You are clever to think that I would visit a place like this the second time."

"You did not find enough on your first visit."

"How not enough?" exclaimed the unknown.

"You will not find what you want now."

"Watch and see."

The man sent a swift look toward one corner, well-filled by a large trunk, and the woman, whose eyes had detected the glance, felt the over-spreading pallor of alarm.

In a moment he had walked to the trunk, and was stooping over it, when Therese drew a small revolver from the folds of her dress, and leveled it.

The click of the lock caused the unknown to spring erect and face her.

"Ho! is that the scheme?" he exclaimed, in tones which did not betray any fear. "That's a nice thing you hold in your hand, madam. Silver-mounted, isn't it? A little delicate, but in a steady hand, it might do one some damage. Yours trembles too much just now. I doubt whether you could hit a barn-door across this room. Go back to your chair, madam, and quiet your nerves."

He spoke with the very essence of coolness, and Therese wondered whether her hand did not shake.

At least it seemed to her that excitement had stilled her heart.

"If you touch the trunk in the corner, I will send a bullet through your brain!" she said.

"With a pistol that shakes like yours, madam?" was the answer.

Instead of returning to the trunk, the man in the mask came toward her.

"Do one of two things," said he, sternly. "Put up the plaything in your hand, or feel my fingers at your throat. The game you are playing may get a back-set within the walls."

The last words, more than any others, were the ones that startled Therese.

This man, then, was no mere burglar. He knew something of the plot for the nabob's millions. Had he come after the papers which had been in the trunk?

The uplifted revolver dropped before the startling words of the unknown.

"Who sent you here?" asked Therese.

"Do I look like any one's slave?" was the quick response.

"A coward wears a mask!"

"So do the members of the the underground League!"

The woman recoiled a step.

Another enemy and the fifth spy.

"Madam, I do not have to remove my mask at your bidding," he went on. "Masks sometimes hide the faces of old acquaintances. It is unnecessary for me to show you mine. I came hither to look into the trunk in the corner. Its owner won't interrupt the proceedings. He is quite busy elsewhere being entertained by a lady in yellow and black."

Therese tried to pick the true kernel out of the last sentence, but though she did her best she did not once think of Captain Nadir's tigers.

"Will you let me go on now?" queried the masked man.

There was no answer.

"The door is unlocked, madam. The game in hand may need your cunning beyond the portals of this room. Or do you wish to remain and see what the old trunk yields?"

The following moment the unknown stepped over to the trunk and threw back the lid.

The Queen of the League saw him dive his hands into the receptacle and in a moment the eyes beneath the black cloth were turned upon her.

"This trunk has false sides," said the unseen lips. "Samson Sparks alias Duke Dillon is shrewd in many ways. Here is the secret door in the false apartment. Do you want to see it, madam?"

Therese did not move.

"Oh, just as you like!" laughed the man, with sarcasm. "I find nothing here but a few letters. Let me see. They are addressed to one 'Therese.' Aba! have you heard the name before to-night, madam?"

The woman of the plot sprung toward the man with a quick cry of excitement.

"These letters were mailed in Paris. They are old things, too. By the marks on the envelopes I see that they were stamped in two prisons. What excites you, madam? These old letters?"

Therese who had halted before the unknown was pale and nearly bloodless. She trembled under a storm of fear and passion, and the hand which she put forward for the papers found them withdrawn suddenly beyond its grasp.

"I guess I'll keep what I've found!" laughed the masked despoiler. "Letters written by one felon to another might prove interesting to the social world of New York. As I have said, they are addressed to 'Therese.' That is not your name, madam. You are the lady who dwells in the big brown house on the avenue. They call you Cora Catlin; therefore I can't see why the letters of a common thief should excite you so!" And as the package taken from the trunk disappeared in the speaker's bosom, the Queen of the League saw the trunk-lid drop, and the cool unknown walk toward the door.

CHAPTER XXXVI. THERÈSE INVESTIGATES.

THE abrupt departure of the cool unknown left the Queen of the League in a sort of a maze.

Her brain seemed to have a whirling motion for some time after he went away. She did not have to ask herself whether it was not some awful dream, and not one of the sternest incidents of the merciless game for a nabob's millions.

She had seen the strong physique of the masked robber, had heard his step, and had listened to his laugh of victory with a shudder.

The next minute she was once more on the street below.

But the man was gone!

Although midnight had passed, and the second hour of the new day had come, there were several persons in sight, but none of them resembled the one who had just left her presence.

"He said that Samson was being entertained by a lady in yellow and black!" she suddenly exclaimed. "What did he mean? Did he know where Samson is, or was it a clever lie to hoodwink me?"

Therese went down the street a few steps and then halted.

"Heavens! Yellow and black! I think I see it now!" burst from her. "Those are the colors of Captain Nadir's tigers. One of the three is a tigress. But I have heard that the house has been strangely quiet, that the people in the vicinity consider the beasts dead. Now comes this unknown plunderer, and fills one's mind with a terrible suspicion. If Samson has gone back to the tigers I can't help him."

For all this instead of hunting the man with the mask Therese was strangely drawn toward the house of the tiger-tamer.

It was many squares away, dark streets and deserted parks intervened but they did not turn the queen of the cabal back.

More than one statue-like policeman on his beat caught a glimpse—nothing more—of a figure that flitted by and was gone.

It was the woman of the secret League.

The thoughts which the one sentence uttered by the unknown had stirred up in her mind was drawing her toward Nadir's jungle with a power which she could not resist.

There was something terribly fascinating in the thought that Samson Sparks, her ally in the deep gold game was watched by a tigress.

And in the heart of New York, too!

Therese did not stop until she saw above her the dark front of Nadir Bali's den.

The tiger-tamer himself was rotting in the dungeons of the League; he could be nowhere else. She knew that he and Danton, the shadow sharp, had been bound to a wall with ropes that would have laughed at the strength of the first Samson.

More than this, the dungeons had been flooded by the pressure of a button in the hall of the tribunal and the water receding after a spell had taken with it the lives of the doomed foe.

Nobody seemed to see Therese approach the house of the tigers.

She mentally remarked how quiet the whole place looked. Perhaps the lady in yellow and black had finished Samson and gone to sleep.

The Queen of the League studied the old house a few moments in silence.

What would she not have given to have crossed its step and taken a peep at the inside?

All at once a grating sound came through one of the shutters as it were.

Therese drew back and held her breath.

"There is life in there," said she to herself. "I wonder if the man in the mask really told the truth?"

The sound died away while she regarded the window and was not repeated.

"I can go round the place," thought she. "There may be a light in the rear. If I find one I will know that the tigers are not the sole tenants of the house."

Therese's curiosity had nerved her for almost any desperate undertaking. She gained the rear of Nadir's house and found a faint light among the slats of an upper shutter.

She longed to look beyond the window thus revealed and nothing offered to assist her.

"Why not go back and wait?" she cried. "I hold the last and best trump in the whole game—the paper he gave me in my own parlor. If Samson has fallen into the net of the tigers and is being guarded up yonder by one of the beasts, he must escape if he can, for there's too much at stake for me to risk my life in the den."

The Queen of the League gave the window above her another look and then turned away.

It seemed to her that she could see a tigress crouched in front of Samson eying him with the ferocity peculiar to her species, and the vision did not vanish until she was some distance from the house.

The streets had grown stiller and seemed darker than when she traversed them last.

On some of them the fall of a leaf made a sound.

Therese was near home when she heard a quick footstep behind her.

She had heard many such since quitting Captain Nadir's house, but none had thrilled her so.

A thought of the man in the mask rushed through her mind.

She did not trust herself to look back, but while she walked along she counted the steps that followed and thus kept pace with the distance lessening between her and the unseen.

At last when Therese felt that not more than three feet separated her from the person at her heels, she turned abruptly and then leaned toward the figure which had checked up at her action.

"What do you want?" demanded the Queen of the League.

The next instant she heard a cry that had no dangerous sound and as the speaker darted at her, her wrist was encircled by five cold fingers.

"I thought it was you, but I dared not investigate on the street," continued the man whose face was half-hidden by the hat which had been dragged over his eyes.

"Ah!" exclaimed Therese in tones of relief.

"Why do you seek me, brother?"

She had found instead of an enemy, a member of the League.

The woman's question carried the man still closer.

"I have come from the chamber," said he, watching her like a hawk, while he lowered his voice.

"Well, what is the news you bring?"

"There is but one man in the trap!"

Therese, the serpent, blanched.

"But one man!" she exclaimed.

"Ay, but one!"

It seemed for a moment that the revelation had transformed the Queen of the League into a statue of stone.

"It is true," continued the man in the slouched hat. "Let us walk on," he added, without looking at her. "I have just come from the trap itself. I went down there to investigate, because I saw a face on the street which sent a thrill through me. 'My God!' thought I, 'has the darkness given up its prisoner?' I had no key, but a bar of iron under the lower door did the work well enough. It sprung the lock, and I struck a match in the Egyptian gloom. For a moment I saw nothing, and then a hideous, bloated, and rat-gnawed body on the floor greeted my sight. I stooped and held the light close to the sickening object. A dozen rats scampered away from it. I saw enough to tell me that it was not the corpse of either of the two men we took to the dungeon one after the other."

The speaker could see how intently Therese was listening, how eagerly she was drinking in every word as it dropped from his tongue.

"I left the man on the ground to look further," he continued. "I went to the spot where we had left the detective. He was gone!"

"Gone?" exclaimed Therese, with a start.

"The water-soaked ropes were there, but the man himself had disappeared. Having made this discovery, I turned to the adjoining dungeon, the one that held the tiger-tamer, you know."

"Yes."

"I found it captiveless like the other, but another find awaited me. The repeated flooding of the trap had destroyed its usefulness. The

wails were sapped, and the men—heaven knows how they got out of their bonds—had but to remove the loosened stones, and thus give the rising water more spread. My matches showed me that and more in less time than I have taken up with my story. The poor devil on the floor of the trap came there without my knowledge. He was not there when we left the Shadow Sharp to his fate."

A faint smile appeared at the woman's lips.

She knew that the victim of the underground flood was the man shut in by Samson, but she did not know that he was Paul Pollen, the escaped convict.

For some time after the man's last words the couple walked over the stones in silence.

Now and then the member of the League could see by glimpses of Therese's face that she was perplexed, but determined to maintain her coolness.

"What are your orders?" ventured the man, after a brief interval of quiet.

"Summon the odd numbers to the hall for the most important meeting in the history of the League," replied Therese. "Don't forget—the odd numbers only. You are one yourself."

The man looked at her a second longer, and then left her as quickly as he had joined her a short time before.

"Escaped!" ejaculated the Queen of the conspiracy. "A thousand like them shall not keep us from the golden goal in sight! The winning card I carry in my bosom, and the League, though outwitted by the rats of its trap, will soon hold them again—the next time forever!" And the man whom Therese met the next moment under the lamp nearest her home must have wondered what made her eyes flash so.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SAMSON QUILTS THE GAME.

"HERE, look at these!"

In the back room of a certain building in Gotham these words were spoken by one man to another.

The person addressed picked up the package which had been deposited on the table, and cut the cord that held together a number of letters.

"Where did you find them?" he asked.

"Behind the false lining of Samson's trunk. I found Therese there waiting for him."

"In his room?"

"Yes. I left her there, too."

"Did she recognize you?"

"She could not for the mask. I told her that Samson was being entertained by a lady in yellow and black, and left her wondering what I meant."

The last speaker, who was the tiger-tamer, went to the window, while Danton, the detective, ran over the letters.

"Do you recognize the stamps on these letters?" asked the Shadow Sharp, glancing at his friend.

"I knew them on sight. They are the marks put upon letters passing through the hands of the prison authorities in Paris. Those letters started from Saint Lazare, as the peculiar stamp in the corner shows, and I read some of them myself before they left the prison. All are signed Therese, you see."

Danton nodded.

"When I went for the stolen marriage record I did not think of sounding the trunk for a false side," said he. "Let us go back to our prisoner. With the proof we have, he ought to be tractable."

"Come, I am eager to relieve Nina," responded Nadir. "The princess gets restless under restraint. If Samson Sparks attempts to escape she will more than bar his way to liberty."

The two men had a long walk through the darkness that preceded the last act of the desperate game for gold.

They drew up in front of Captain Nadir's house and entered.

At the head of the steps appeared two ferocious heads, furnished with terrible teeth and blazing eyeballs.

At sight of the tigers Nadir stopped and looked at Danton.

"There's blood in the house!" said he. "Nepaul and Nero have been kept from a feast of some kind. Geds! what if the Princess has finished the Man of the League?"

With a command for the tigers which they sullenly obeyed, Nadir led the way up-stairs.

As the two paused at the door of the room where they had left Samson Sparks under guard, they heard a peculiar noise accompanied by a quick muffled step like that of some large animal.

Nadir drew a revolver and unlocked the door.

"Back!" he cried to the magnificent tigress that faced them, both with head erect and eyes on fire. "What have you done to the Man of the League?"

The question was answered by a look, on Nadir's part.

Lying at the foot of the wall, on which were seen some stains which looked like rude writing, was the body of a man.

Nina, the tigress, threw a fierce and triumphant glance toward the prostrate body, toward which Nadir Bali sprung with a sudden cry.

"He is dead!" exclaimed the tiger-tamer. "If

he had not tried to escape, Nina would not have touched him. He was at the window. See! He actually broke one of the bars and had forced the shutter. Nina attacked him there."

"But, those stains on the wall are rude letters!" cried Danton. "What is the last message of the coolest villain of the century?"

The two men followed the rambling marks on the wall. They seemed to have been traced by one in the agonies of death, and it was some time before they resolved themselves into anything intelligible.

At length the puzzle stood revealed, and Danton and the man of the tigers read these words:

"Don't let the woman of St. Lazare succeed!"

The two friends looked at one another.

"Why should he write that?" asked Danton.

"He probably attributed his end to her," was the answer. "But for the Queen of the League Samson Sparks would not be here to-night, dead on my floor."

"Don't let the woman of Saint Lazare succeed!" repeated Danton, as if to fix the words in his memory. "By heavens! she shall not! At the very end Samson turned against her; but if he had escaped, we would have had the League at our heels once more."

Nadir and Danton did not tarry long in the room where the Man of the League had ended his career.

They left the dead alone, unwatched and unguarded, and the showman shut his pets up in their cages.

"There is another place to be visited before we strike the last blow," said the tiger-tamer.

"Nelly's?"

"Nelly's."

Thirty minutes later the two men entered the alley which held the convict's house, and Nadir knocked at the door.

Day had broken over the city, and the news-girl was astir.

She fell back with a look of astonishment at sight of the detective and his companion, but a smile from Nadir reassured her.

"Nelly," said the man of the tigers, "I have come to ask if you will let me see the portrait and the letters you found the other day."

"How do you know I found any?"

"Mox has good eyes and excellent ears, too," was the reply that mystified the convict's child. "You showed the portrait to the man with the crescent scar under his eye, but you would not let him see the letters. May I see them?"

Without answering, Nelly retired for a moment, and then placed a package in the tiger-tamer's hands.

"It is she!" cried Nadir, with a glance at the beautiful face before him.

"That is my mother," replied the girl, flushing proudly. "Did you know her?"

Nadir turned to the letters without a word.

"These settle the matter," said he at last, looking up at Danton.

"They settle what? Tell me!" cried the girl.

Her hand seemed to sink into the detective's arm, and her whole figure quivered with emotion while she looked up into his face.

"Nell, my child, your father never heard the grinding of prison-doors," said he. "These letters were written by your mother's father to her. She was Paul Pollen's wife, but there isn't a drop of bad blood in your veins. Your grandfather contracted a secret marriage which was broken by death, a year afterward. He let the issue of that marriage pass into the hands of strangers, but he did not altogether lose sight of the little girl. She grew to womanhood and became the wife of Paul Pollen, but not until she had been a widow with one child—yourself. You were so young when you came to the convict's home that he took you to his heart as his own and raised you as such. These letters written by your grandfather to your mother, do not reveal his name. She died without knowing it, but the time has come for the unraveling of the skein."

During this recital Nelly Pollen stood speechless and white-faced before the tiger-tamer.

"Let me take these with me," continued Nadir, bunching the letters. "Captain Danton and I have two more plays to make."

"Take them," replied the girl. "But will that man with the scar come any more?"

"No."

"And my— Paul Pollen, I mean?"

"He has left the game. The doors of Sing Sing will never open for him again."

Nelly seemed to understand, for she made no reply, and in silence saw the two men quit the house.

The afternoon of that same day was drawing to a close and a warm wind was nestling the velvet leaves of the Park trees.

A man came down the broad steps of Lloyd Loris's house and walked away.

In a moment he had a spy at his heels and for twenty minutes he was watched with the eyes of a lynx.

Half-way across the city from the house he had left he disappeared in a hallway and ascended a flight of stairs to a door at which he knocked.

"I have found you!" he exclaimed greeting

the man who confronted him as he crossed the threshold.

The occupant of the room was the Shadow Sharp.

"You can't baffle the League without betraying the secret," exclaimed the nabob. "The woman will tell everything after her arrest. Floy hovers between life and death. The shock of the serpent's visit was too much for her. Here! You will see that this check reaches the proper person!"

Danton picked up the slip of paper that had fallen on the table before him and read:

"Pay to the order of Nelly Pollen ten thousand dollars.
LLOYD LORIS."

The check was properly dated and every thing was square.

"I promised her father to pay that amount to his child in case he never came back from the trail he took," continued Loris.

The detective smiled.

"There is no such person as Nelly Pollen in reality," said he.

The nabob's answer was a stare.

"He had a child—"

"He had none! Nelly was his wife's child by a former marriage. The convict adopted her. You ought to pay the girl more than ten thousand."

"I?—Why?"

"Because," answered Danton, leaning forward, "because Nelly Pollen, so-called, is the daughter of her who was at one time Nellie Loris!"

There was a start and a cry, and the Shadow Sharp caught a falling man.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

WHICH ENDS ALL.

WAITING in her drawing-room with the hands of the clock approaching the hour of nine sat the handsome woman, whose hand has been uppermost in our story from the beginning.

Therese knew nothing of the deserved fate of the man who had plotted with her in a dozen deep gold games during the last few years.

But, Samson's absence did not deter her. She still had the important slip of paper which Lloyd Loris had written across and signed in her presence.

She knew that her last visit to the prey of the League had thrown Floy into the very shadows of death, that the family physician shook his head over her chances of life, but this did not stop her.

One more turn of the screw would put the nabob in her power. The marriage ceremony which was to take place in her drawing room at nine would fasten the net over Loris and as his wife his wealth would belong to her and to the League.

She doubted not that Loris would come.

The time lacked the last quarter when Therese heard the bell.

Her heart gave a quick leap and then she heard little Iris go down the hall and open the door.

The next moment she cast her eyes toward the hall and saw—not the quarry of the golden hounds, but two figures which she knew at sight.

They were Danton and Nadir!

Bowing coldly to the astonished woman the Shadow Sharp crossed the room and parted the falling doors which once before he had seen open to his sorrow.

A smile curled Therese's lips at this action as she, too, recalled the thrilling incident of the detective's discomfiture.

There was no one beyond the doors and with a sweeping glance at the space there Danton turned to Therese and came forward.

"He cannot come to-night," said he, meeting with interest the look she gave him. "The fly of the web has broken the meshes. He no longer fears the hand of the League. Captain Nadir here will do the talking now."

The detective waved his hand toward the tiger-tamer who had been watching Therese with a smile. She turned to him and met his deep stern look.

"Samson Sparks sends us hither, for one thing," said Nadir. "He has lately said: 'Don't let the woman of Saint Lazare succeed.'"

The Queen of the League colored.

"He never said that!" cried she.

"He wrote it on the wall of my house with his own blood," answered the showman coolly. "Madam 99, the man who has plotted, spied and robbed for you is dead. He was killed by a lady in yellow and black."

"By your tigress, you mean!" cried Therese, at which Nadir executed a slight nod.

"We are Samson's obedient servants," he went on with sarcasm. "You have played a deep game with the League—a league of your own creation—at your back. Ere this the hall of the tribunal is open to the curious, and the dark trap with its one prisoner is revealed by the lanterns of the police. Lloyd Loris no longer cares for your snares; the paper he gave you would not cause a shudder if held before his eyes."

"What! is he dead?" exclaimed Therese.

"No!"

"Then while I live let him refuse to carry out his agreement if he dare!"

The two men looked at each other and smiled.

"Look at this," said Nadir, tossing a letter into the woman's lap. "The envelope bears the stamp of a prison. We have twenty more like it."

The letter which the woman had taken up fell from her hands.

"We have the stolen marriage record of Petersham chapel," put in Danton. "Not long ago a man was stabbed at a certain door, but he ran to the street and was picked up for dead in the gutter. He died in the hospital, and it is believed that he took with him into the realm of the unknown the name of his assassin. You may not know that a man who had picked up a few links here and there saw the man die—that his hand traced on the sheet at the last moment a name—the name of the same woman denounced by Samson Sparks on the wall. The man stabbed in my doorway wrote 'Cora,' Samson wrote 'Therese!'

"Now, madam, we have come for our prey. Lloyd Loris, who would have held me back last night, will not interfere. The victim of the League is mad!"

Therese sprung up and faced the two men with the mien of a cornered tigress.

"You can't strike him and hurt," continued Danton. "He knows that Nelly, the news-girl, is the child of his daughter by the wife of the secret union, Floy's half-sister. You might tell your secrets to the world. What would the mad nabob care now? Floy, hovering between life and death, is so guarded that the blow would never touch her. You stabbed the member of the League in my door, and shot Cad Castile, or Reddy the Rogue, in the hall of the cabal, but the Rogue is convalescing at the hospital, and burns to tell the story of your life in a court of justice."

Therese did not speak for a moment.

"For what, then, do you want me?"

"For murder!"

"Yes, Madam 99," smiled Nadir. "This is America, and not France."

At that moment the face of little Iris appeared in the door, and the Queen of the League fell back at sight of it.

"Go back, child!" said she, and, wondering, Iris disappeared.

"I am yours," she continued, to Danton and Nadir. "Don't you think the stakes were worth the play?"

Before there could be a reply, she stepped to the table and threw open the lid of an ivory box in the center.

Thrusting her right hand in she looked at the surprised men and showed pearly teeth in a cunning smile.

"I am yours, I say, gentlemen. This is the only game Therese of Paris ever lost. The current is coming. Ha! you did not know I had this!"

She tottered from the table, her hand leaping from the ivory box, and when the arm of Danton encircled her waist, he knew he held a corpse—the victim of electric death!

Six months later a handsome man in ring-costume announced that he was appearing for the last time with his performing tigers. When the last act had been repeated, and the applauding audience was moving toward the exit, a beautiful girl of seventeen, accompanied by a young man known as Dick Clayton, a reporter, came forward and took the showman's hand.

"Grandfather is coming back from the insane ward to-morrow," said she. "He will be here in time to see Floy married to Claude, and Dick and I intend to surprise him, with the minister's assistance. Of course you will come, Captain Nadir? Mr. Danton is to be there. The secret is safe, you know: the League of the Hidden Hands perished when its empress died."

Nadir kissed the white forehead of the girl, once known as Nelly Pollen, and that night he told the Shadow Sharp that the man whom they had rescued from the machinations of the coolest conspiracy of modern times was coming back to his own—to Floy and Nelly, the long-lost grandchild—with a new lease of life.

Lloyd Loris came back to learn that the branded tigress of the French prison would no more show the claw beneath the velvet. Once more and forever the secret of the past was safe; and when the double wedding took place Captain Nadir received a present of more value than his tigers and the check which Danton presented at a certain counter almost took the breath of the officer of the bank.

Though the results of the plot for the nabob's gold deprived old Anak of a customer, in the person of Paul Pollen, the convict, the shop did not close its doors, and it is more than suspected that Dido's brush still does some very neat jobs in her line.

The tragic deaths of Therese and Samson broke up the underground League, for its members were afraid to oppose the man who had escaped from the dungeon trap and who had gathered, bit by bit, with the assistance of Nadir, evidence sufficient to drive the ruling spirit of the gigantic plot to her death at her own hands.

THE END.

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